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First breeding of Red-tailed Shrike in Arabia

Jens Eriksen and Michael C Jennings

The red-tailed shrike *Lanius isabellinus* is an abundant passage migrant and winter visitor to Oman from mid-August to late May with a few records in summer (Eriksen et al. 2003). The races *isabellinus* and *phoenicuroides* occur, though the form *karelini* has also been suggested (P. A. Lassey, *pers. comm.*).

While carrying out a survey of breeding birds in Al Jebal al Akhdar, the dominant mountain range in northern Oman, one of us (MCJ) found a red-tailed shrike *L. i. phoenicuroides* in song at 2357 m on the Saiq Plateau (XB23) on 18 April 2005. The bird was agitated giving harsh calls when approached by the observer. Two further observations of red-tailed shrikes were made over the next few days including a bird in subsong on the nearby Jebal Shems (XA23) in the west of the range. Visiting the same area of the Saiq Plateau on 7 July 2005 JE's attention was caught by unfamiliar bird calls coming from some trees. Further investigation revealed that the sounds came from three food-begging young red-tailed shrikes. Over a period of half an hour they were fed in turn by both parents. The family then slowly moved away from the observer. The area is a high plateau (over 2300 m) with scattered juniper *Juniperus*, wild olive *Olea* and buut *Monotheca buxifolia* trees and nimpt *Sageretia spicifolia* bushes.

This represents the first confirmed breeding record of red-tailed shrikes in Oman and Arabia. The parent birds were in extremely worn plumage and were not identified to race. Lack of time prevented further studies in the area though at least two more red-tailed shrikes were seen. *L. i. phoenicuroides* breeds from central Iran to the northeast and is replaced in the east and in central China by *L. i. isabellinus* (Worfolk, 2000). Considering these geographical ranges one would expect *phoenicuroides* to be the more likely candidate for breeding in eastern Oman. The form *karelini* apparently is found mainly in lowlands whereas *phoenicuroides* predominates in mountainous areas a factor also pointing to it being the breeding race in Oman. During the Oman

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الإشراف والنشر بواسطة
الهيئة الوطنية لحماية الحياة الفطرية
وإنمائها.
ص ب ٦١٦٨١، الرياض،
المملكة العربية السعودية

Flora and Fauna Survey of the birds of Al Jebal al Akhdar in 1975 a red-tailed shrike was observed on 22 April and considered to be of the race *isabellinus* (Gallagher, 1977). However, as there was no mention of song from this individual it could just have been a bird on passage. Previous summer records of red-tailed shrike include an observation of three immature birds from the Saiq Plateau on 7 July 2000, (Jennings, 2000).

We hope further studies next summer can reveal whether there is a small but stable breeding population of red-tailed shrikes on the Saiq Plateau and perhaps more widely on Al Jebal al Akhdar as well as determining the race.

While JE was studying the shrikes in July 2005 several isabelline wheatears *Oenanthe isabellinus* were found in the same area. Perhaps these records represent a breeding population of this species as well? If so, it would be another first for Oman and Arabia.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank Sultan Qaboos University and grant No. SR/AVP/CERS/04/01 for financial support of this work.

References: • Eriksen, J., Sargeant, D. E., and Victor, R. (2003), *Oman Bird List, Edition 6*, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman (p 136). • Gallagher, M. (1977), Birds of Jabal Akhdar, *in* The Scientific Results of the Oman Flora and Fauna Survey 1975, *J. Oman Stud. Spec. Report*, p 27-58. • Jennings, M. C. 2000. Isabelline shrikes - worth a second look. *Phoenix* 17:12. • Worfolk, T. 2000. Identification of Red-backed, Isabelline and Brown Shrikes, *Dutch Birding* 22:323-362.

Jens Eriksen[1] and Michael C. Jennings. [1]The Petroleum Institute, P O Box 2533, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Email: hjoman@emirates.net.ae.

Note on nomenclature and taxonomy. The English name 'red-tailed shrike' is the preferred ABBA common name for the taxa *Lanius isabellinus isabellinus* and *L. i. phoenicuroides*. Although the name 'isabelline shrike' is also in common usage for these birds it can be slightly confusing, both in print and conversation, to use that name when referring to *L. i. phoenicuroides* (which has the common name of 'rufous shrike'). Many published sources refer to the race *L. i. speculigerus* of central China occurring in Arabia on migration and in winter. However, Pearson (2000: *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 120 :22-27) has pointed out that this is a synonym for *L. i. isabellinus*. The name *karelini* seems now to be mostly used for a pale morph of *L. i. phoenicuroides*.

Introduction

A great milestone was reached during 2005 - a first rough draft of the atlas has been achieved, with the introductory chapters prepared and all the species accounts worked up to at least a first draft. However there is still a lot of work to do, especially with tabulated appendices, maps and artwork layouts and inevitable format tinkering, not to mention the editors requirements, before it will be ready for reproduction. This is not the end but it might be the beginning of the end.

Ornithologists in Arabia continue to find new breeding species. This year there is another new shrike breeding, see page 1. Hidden in the 'Recent Reports' (page 24) you will find another new breeder. The stone curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus* has been suspected of breeding for years but so far this has not been proven. There will be eventually be a cut off date for new breeding species but readers active in Arabia should continue with their hard work for the time being.

There have been two ABBA surveys during the year. In February I was lucky to be able to visit the little known north central part of Yemen (page 17). Then in March and April I spent seven weeks in Oman (page 18) where I was able to carry out a survey of birds on the Jebal al Akhdar. This survey produced some good data on local species, especially the wood pigeon *Columba palumbus* which is only found in Arabia on that mountain.

2005 has also been a good year for bird books - three major new titles have appeared, including at last a comprehensive checklist for Kuwait.

A considerable amount of work is now going on to check and verify all data held by ABBA to ensure that, as far as possible, the database and therefore the final atlas, is free from error. There are many ways in which databases get corrupted, the easiest is of course human error when inputting the data. This is often dismissed as 'finger trouble' but it can have far reaching implications on the data and, in ABBA's case, on bird distribution. The *Interim Atlas* (Jennings, 1995) contains one or two bloomers in this respect. One way observers can help the data verification process is to receive a printout and map showing the details and location (squares) for all the records they have submitted over the years. If you would like to check your own data please write to me, or preferably email *arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com,* for your personal map of squares you have reported on and a printout of all the records and notes you have sent in. Record prints can be prepared in any order but observers will probably find records listed in taxonomic order, or by date order, are the easiest to handle.

Finally I would like to thank those who have very kindly given financial donations to assist the ABBA project and *Phoenix* during the year. There are many parts of the ABBA project costs that are not met by the NCWCD sponsors and so I do very much appreciate the donations I have received from John Ady, Michael Gallagher, Dr P Gray, George Gregory and anonymous donors during the year.

Michael Jennings

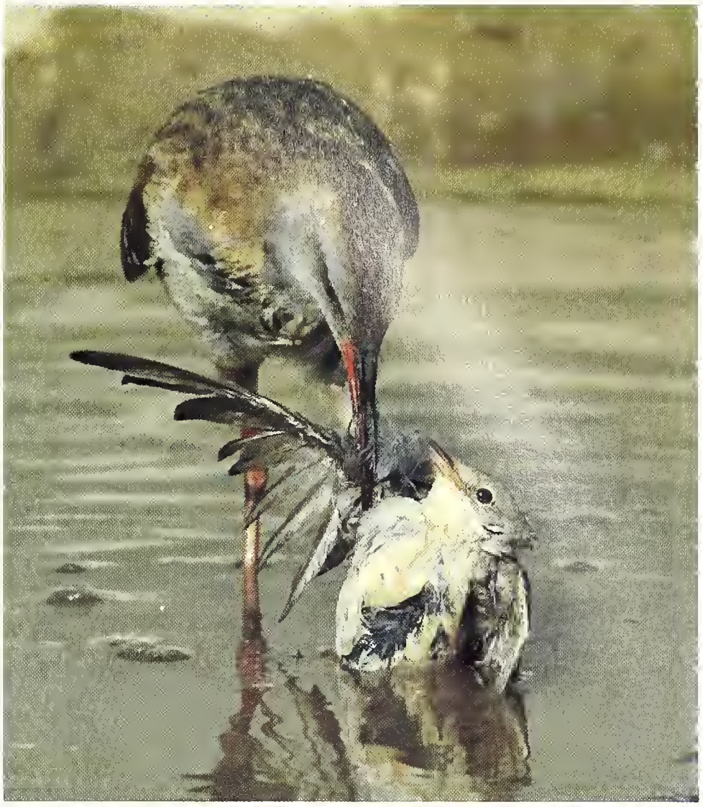
The Water Rail as an Avian Predator

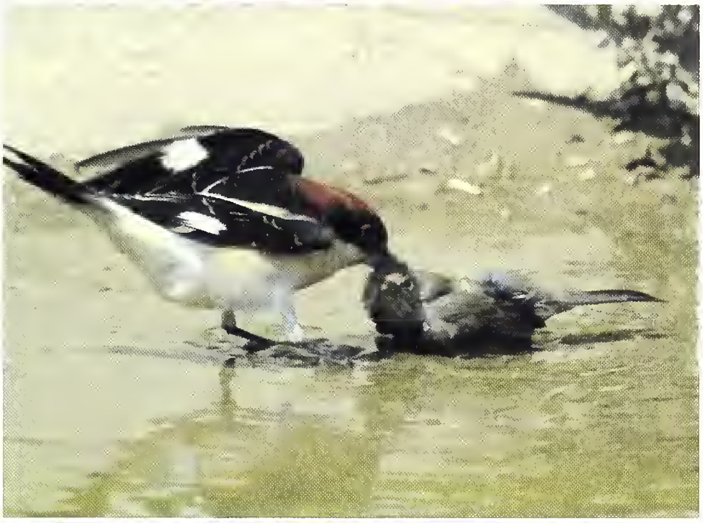
by Abdullah Alfadhel

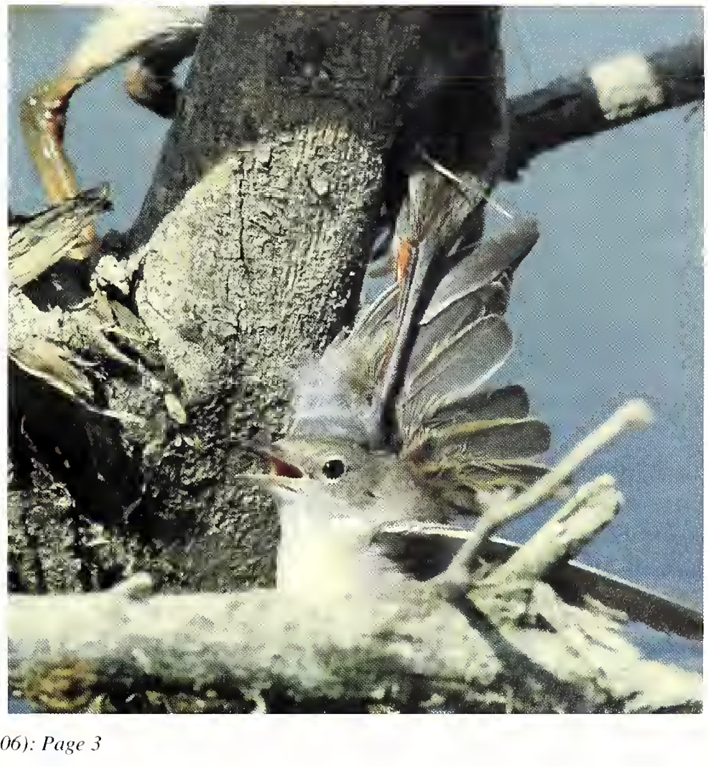
On 9 September 2004 there was a heavy migration through the Sabah al Ahmed Natural Reserve (NB36) Kuwait. I saw hundreds of birds and as it was still summer it was very hot and a number of species were attracted to drink at the small pool built in the park.

A water rail *Rallus aquaticus* was in the pool and very close to some small birds that were drinking. Suddenly I heard a bird screaming loudly and I saw that a whitethroat *Sylvia communis* had been caught by the water rail and was (*continued on p. 4*)

Clockwise: 1. Water rail *Rallus aquaticus* having grabbed a whitethroat *Sylvia communis* gives it a good battering and dunking but fails to kill it. 2. The bedraggled whitethroat struggles to the shore but before it can regain its composure it is seized and killed by a woodchat shrike *Lanius senator*. 3. Later the water rail grabs another whitethroat after climbing into a bush - but that one eventually escapes. These pictures and others showing the two woodchats squabbling over the corpse and the water rail apparently eating parts of the original whitethroat corpse were all taken by Abdullah Alfadhel in Kuwait. Some have been used in his recent book *Birds of Kuwait - a portrait*, published in 2005 and reviewed at page 8. 4. A white-tailed plover *Chettusia leucura* flies overhead at Al Wahsen lake, Dubai May 2005. At least two pairs had eggs and/or chicks there on 12 May 2005. (Photo Bernard Pleasance). 5. At al Ain Zoo in May 2005 about 15 pairs of sacred ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus* were breeding ferally outside of a cage where another 10 pairs were breeding in captivity. (Photo Bernard Pleasance).







being held in its bill. The water rail proceeded to hammer the whitethroat with its bill and dragged/pushed it into the water where it quickly became saturated. The back of the whitethroat was injured quite quickly by the rail, which continued to hit it hard with its bill. However after a few seconds, for some reason, the rail let go of the warbler. This may have been because it was disturbed by the loud distress calls which the whitethroat continued to make. The whitethroat then managed to drag itself to the edge of the water but just lay there exhausted and bleeding. After about half an hour the whitethroat was still alive but had not been able to recover when a woodchat shrike *Lanius senator* flew down and grabbed it at the waters edge. It killed it by crushing its head and then took it behind some bushes close to the water hole and tried to eat it. However shortly afterwards another woodchat turned up and tried to steal the dead bird from the first shrike, they fought over it for a while but then both disappeared. After this the water rail re-appeared and took the dead whitethroat back to the water and started hitting it very hard again as it lay in the water. It seemed to be trying to dismembering it and appeared to eat part of the brain but I was busy photographing the many other birds at the time and could not observe the outcome.

An hour later I was able to photograph the water rail again when it had just grabbed another whitethroat after climbing into a bush, but that bird eventually escaped unharmed.

Abdullah Alfadhel, Kuwait Environment Protection Society, P O Box: 1896 Safat, Kuwait 13019. Email: q8nature@hotmail.com

Editors remarks: Handbooks refer to water rails catching, killing and eating vertebrates including small birds but this has never been reported before from Arabia. The interesting thing in this instance is that by taking the whitethroat corpse killed by another species it is also the first record from Arabia of water rail eating carrion. Other images taken at the time appear in Abdullah's book *Birds of Kuwait - a portrait* see review page 8.

The Little Green Bee-eaters of Jadaf

by Mohammed Arfan Asif

The little green bee-eater *Merops orientalis* is a smart bird and probably tests a nature photographer's patience to the limit. For some years now I have been photographing them at Jadaf, near Dubai, where they have been nesting regularly. The location is particularly convenient for me because it is just behind my place of work as a pharmacist at the Al Wasl Hospital. I find taking photographs in the same area regularly has dividends because the police and other local people become familiar with my strange behaviour, especially hiding in a small tent in the middle of nowhere. From the many hours spent in a hide observing their nests I have come to know this bee-eater very well and I would like to record some of my observations of it.

First to find an active nest. This is not easy as there are often many holes in the soil banks, from mammals and reptiles as well as old bee-eater nests. During the spring and early summer observation of adults that appear to be catching more prey than they are eating will soon lead to a nest with young. Nests in the area were usually burrowed into hard dry mounds of mud. The nest entrance could be on a vertical face or on sloping ground at about 40° . My observations at nests, once the chicks are hatched, reveal that both parents are involved in parenting and take turns to feed the chicks. When they are feeding young it seemed to me that if they thought there was any danger to the brood, for example from people nearby or any other activity like vehicles passing close by, then one of them would always keeps a watch on the nest from a distant. If the place is calm, particularly during early morning, both the parents would be busy hunting away from the nest. They tend to slow down their rate of activity in late afternoon and dusk usually finds them perched and inactive.

Sometimes adults catch prey just by the nest entrance but more often they fly 100 m or more to a favoured hunting site, this was often the local nursery garden. Hunting forays seemed to be an average of about 15 minutes but they could be away up to 40 minutes. The majority of prey I saw brought to the nest (about 95%), was comprised of bees, wasps and flies, but moths, butterflies and grasshoppers are also regularly taken. They are well known to hunt from a favourite perch returning to the perch after each mid air catch, to kill the prey by banging it on the perch. I have seen some birds with damaged beaks which could have been caused by vigorous prey banging. Sometimes however prey is presented to young whilst still alive. This may be part of their training for dealing with real prey later. Many times however I have seen a bee and other prey escape even after it has been taken into the nest. I presume the chicks are not always capable of killing their own food initially or are to cautious to accept struggling prey. When the chicks get bigger they move to the mouth of the hole and peep out and chirp loudly, especially if the parents have not approached the nest with food for sometime. The parents seem somewhat anxious when this happens perhaps because they fear the nest will be noticed by a predator. As young grow the parents hunt continuously and on one occasion I saw one adult follow the other into the nest hole with food. Adults will also leave food at the entrance of the hole for the chicks to pick up. One pair I watched presented their chicks with a variety of prey items but the chicks only accepted bees and wasps and other prey was returned to the adults to eat.

Once the parents decide that chicks are old enough to leave the nest and hunt for themselves they stop coming to the nest with food and keep calling for the chicks to come out. Perhaps hunger eventually drives them to leave the nest. I had the good fortune to observe this happening twice and on both the occasions the parents had not approached the nest for nearly an hour. The two broods I watched leave the nest were of two and three young.

I have not recorded any interactions with other species during nesting, either as predator or competitor. However I have seen competition for prey with other species when the bee-eaters were not breeding. On one occasion I noticed a tussle for a butterfly in mid-air between a little green bee-eater and a house sparrow *Passer domesticus*. At a height of about 6 m they were bumping into each other trying to get a butterfly, *Vanessa cardui*, which tried to escape every time the two birds were engaged with each other. Finally the bee-eater succeeded in getting the butterfly. I have found one active bee-eater nest situated only a metre from an active red-wattled plover *Hoplopterus indicus* nest. Each species ignored the other.

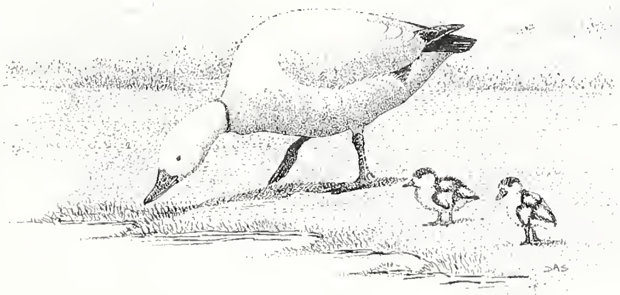
From my experience they do not re-use the same nest, either in the same season or in a subsequent season. On one occasion a pair I recognised, from marks on the wings, had a second clutch after excavating a new nest hole only 2.4 m from the original nest and within a month of the previous brood fledging. One of the nests where I had seen the chicks finally leave and hunt for themselves was dug out. I found a very neat tunnel 60-65 mm in diameter extending about 1.8 m in length and ending up in an oval cavity 150 mm in diameter. The cavity was bare with no nest material but there were plenty of droppings present.

Mohammed Arfan Asif P O Box 9115, Admin R No 1, Al Wasl Hospital, Dubai, UAE. Email: arfan7@yahoo.com

Recent Kuwait Breeding News

by George Gregory

Members of the Bird Monitoring and Protection Team (BMAPT) Kuwait, including Mahmoud Shehab, Abdalla Alfadhel (AAF), Essa Ramadan, Fahad Al-Mansori, Mish'al Al-Jraiwi, Hussain Al-Qallaf (HAQ), Abdulmuhsen Al-Sureye'a, Musaad Al-Saleh, Khalid Al-Ghanim (KAG), AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan (AAS), George Gregory (GG), Andrew Bailey (AB), Pekka Fagel (PF) and Brian Foster (BF) have continued their efforts to discover as much breeding evidence as possible before the publication of the final Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia. The following is a selection of some of the recent discoveries. All records are from 2005 unless shown otherwise.



Ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* Three seen by PF, BF and GG in suitable breeding habitat at East Doha (NB35), 3-17 March.

Quail *Coturnix coturnix* On 18 March a singing male seen and heard by GG at Kabd (NB35).

Little bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* On 21 June breeding was confirmed by a sighting of two juveniles with two adults at a reed-fringed pool at Wafra (OA34) by BF.

Night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* An adult in reeds at South Doha Nature Reserve (NB35) seen by BF on 23 June was also a possible breeder.

Black-shouldered kite *Elanus caeruleus* One was seen and photographed by KAG at Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35) on 28 June 2003.

Spotted crake *Porzana porzana* On 24 February one heard singing at Jahra Pool Reserve by GG, BF and Charlie Moores.

Little crake *Porzana parva* In 2005, singing birds were heard at East Doha and Jahra Pool Reserve from February onwards by GG, AB, BF, PF and others.

Common moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Breeding was proved on 6 May by BF and PF, who observed three juveniles with an adult at Sabah Al-Salem (OA35), and on 19 May by the same observers, who observed four juveniles with an adult at East Doha.

Purple gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio* On 12 May PF discovered one at South Doha Nature Reserve and it was quickly established that at least six birds were present in the reeds there, forming a small resident population.

Black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus* On 20 May BF and PF observed distraction display by parents at South Doha Nature Reserve and saw 16 newly-fledged juveniles at Jahra East Outfall with 46 adults.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* A full-winged juvenile seen by BF and AB at East Doha on 17 June was evidence of breeding in Kuwait but the exact ABBA square is uncertain.

Saunders' tern *Sterna saundersi* On 20 and 27 May BF and AB observed at least ten Saunders' terns among little terns *Sterna albifrons* at Jahra East Outfall.

Whiskered tern *Chlidonias hybridus* A juvenile seen together with six adults by BF and AB at East Doha on 17 June does not constitute proof of local breeding since young terns are known to move considerable distances just after fledging.

African collared dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea* In 2004 two wild-type birds, seen by AAF, GG and others, were present in the Sabah Al-Ahmed Natural Reserve (NB36) throughout the year, and at least until early 2005, but there was no observed evidence of breeding. One was at Sabah Al-Salem on 14 May. At least two were present at Kabd, seen by GG and others, from 1 September 2004 and were still present in early 2005.

Barn owl *Tyto alba* Yaqoub Boodai (YB) and others observed this species nesting in 2001 and 2002 at the Yaqoub Boodai Farm at Abdali (NB37). The nest site was in a cavity inside a well and several young were observed.

Egyptian nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* Egyptian nightjars have recently been proven to be present in both winter and summer in Kuwait, but not in large numbers. In fairly recent years there have been records from November to February at locations such as Qaisat and Kuwait City, involving birds seen after sunset. Members of BMAPT saw at least one in the Sabah Al-Ahmed Natural Reserve after dark on 7 June 2001. This was the first year that fresh water was supplied throughout the summer in a drinking pool there. Mark Chichester observed a single bird at Zour Port (OA34), where there are freshwater ponds, on 15 and 16 July 2001. The KISR Bird Team has carried out night surveys at the Agricultural Research Station at Kabd (NB35), where there is available fresh water, several times every month since January 2004. They have recorded this species every month there, seeing one or two birds during almost every survey. GG, who lived there from September 2004 to April 2005, frequently saw Egyptian Nightjars there after dark in each of these months. During this period, he also occasionally observed one or two individuals, again after dark, at Qaisat (NB35), where there are open freshwater pools, and in the area around Jahra Pool Reserve, where there is standing sewage water. Burgan Oil Field, where there are freshwater pools, is clearly also likely to hold birds in winter and summer, but there is no access there at night. YB and others have seen up to six almost every night throughout the summer, feeding on insects visible in the light from the house, at the Yaqoub Boodai Farm at Abdali, for many years. There are freshwater pools there and breeding must surely occur there.

Blue-cheeked bee-eater *Merops superciliosus* About 14 old nest holes, which were briefly frequented by adults, were discovered at Wafra Farms (OA34), on 12 March by PF and BF.

Black-crowned finch-lark *Eremophila nigriceps* At least three pairs were discovered nesting at Kabd by T. Thomas on 8 March.

Dunn's lark *Eremalauda dunni* In recent years birds have been resident in the Sabah Al-Ahmed Natural Reserve, and were proven to breed there in 2005, with a newly fledged juvenile seen and photographed there by HAQ and other members of BMAPT.

Barn swallow *Hirundo rustica* Several juveniles seen with adults by AB at Jahra East Outfall on 8 July could have hatched at the inaccessible site of Jahra Ponds (NB35).

Rufous-tailed scrub robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* On 23 June breeding was confirmed at South Doha Nature Reserve by BF, with two newly-fledged young observed with adults.

Hooded wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* AAS observed and photographed a male singing and displaying to a female in the Sabah Al-Ahmed Natural Reserve on 4 April 2002.

Grasshopper warbler *Locustella naevia* On 11 April a bird was heard singing at Sabah Al-Salem by BF, but there was no further evidence of breeding.

Savi's warbler *Locustella lusciniodes* In 2005 birds, seen by BF and PF, sang at East Doha and Sabah Al-Salem from March onwards. However, no further evidence of breeding has been obtained.

European reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* Breeding was proven by BF at South Doha Nature Reserve on 23 June, when two newly-fledged juveniles were observed.

Basra reed warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis* A single bird was heard singing at South Doha Nature Reserve on 20 May by BF and PF.

Great reed warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* On 23 June BF observed an adult feeding young at South Doha Nature Reserve.

Clamorous warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* From February 2005 song was heard at a new reed bed at East Doha by BF and PF.

Bank myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* In early March 2005 six birds, seen by PF, BF and GG, started re-excavating nest holes in a well at the Abdullah Al-Habashi Farm at Jahra (NB35) and the colony was clearly re-establishing itself there. The numbers of breeding birds clearly fluctuate in Kuwait.

Red avadavat *Amandava amandava* One was seen by PF at South Doha Nature Reserve on 2 May .

George Gregory, Gibraltar Point Field Station, Gibraltar Road, Skegness, Lincs., PE24 4SU. Email: ggregory71@lycos.com.

New Books

Phoenix aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to birds and wildlife in Arabia or generally to the Arabian/Middle East environment. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number, if given. The prices shown against the following titles are published prices but may include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of contents. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

Common Birds in Oman - an identification guide by Hanne and Jens Eriksen (2005)

Those Eriksens have done it again! Another beautifully illustrated guide to Oman birds, this time a photographic identification guide to the commonest species of Oman. The quality of the photos needs hardly be mentioned. It is superb as you would expect from this team. For a field guide you need a bit more than arty images, you need pictures that allow some comparison between species and this is well achieved as most birds are in profile - like a regular field guide. The images are very skilfully arranged on the page by superimposing image on image, faded edges and other digital imagery tricks are used to the full so that important plumages differences for each species can be clearly seen, for example male/female, summer/winter adult/juvenile variations. Many species have up to three separate images. Altogether about 400 photos illustrate 250 of the most common species in Oman. The arrangement of species is not in systematic order but by main habitat type. This seems a little odd for experienced birders but this book is mainly aimed at the birding visitors to Oman and novice birders who are most likely to want to know what to see in the main habitats such as gardens, parks and farmland, coasts, wetlands, mountains and deserts and Dhofar. This is how the birds are grouped. There is an introduction on how and where to bird in Oman and useful sources for more information. For each species dealt with there is an English and scientific name, its size, at least one photo, a note on the habitat and where it might be seen, its status in Oman at each season and short notes on description and habits that might help identification. There is also a map showing seasonal occurrence in Oman and a bar chart showing the months they may be seen. An index is helpful as is a checklist of the nearly 500 species now recorded in Oman. This book is highly recommended as a first guide to Oman birds for newcomers to the country and birdwatching beginners but many experienced birders will want a copy for the quality of the images.

Laminated card covers, 256 pages (145 X 210 mm). Published by Al Roya Publishing for the Ministry of Tourism.

The Birds of the State of Kuwait by George Gregory (2005)

We have all waited a long time for a complete and detailed checklist of the birds of Kuwait and with the arrival of this book one feels it was worth waiting for. The checklist has all the right introductory chapters, including a good history of ornithology in Kuwait, notes on the environment, bird protection and conservation, and important aspects of bird-life in the state. There is a good section on bird watching sites (with a locator map), detailing 37 sites, how to find them, habitat notes and what you can see and when. Appendices deal with species recorded which are of captive origin (some may breed) and the inevitable listing of species requiring further confirmation. Both these last sections include full details of history and records. There are also a useful bibliography and indexes. For each of the species dealt with on the main list of birds, information is provided of the general status in Kuwait as an introductory statement, e.g. "Uncommon winter visitor, scarce resident, breeds". This is followed by a detailed account of the individual records (date, place and observers) and thorough historical notes on occurrence and changes in status. For many species there are notes on identification and field descriptions of actual birds. For visiting species there is a table showing occurrence throughout the year in ten day periods summarising all records over a seven year period. The author, who has 14 years experience of Kuwait birds, has done a very effective job in critically examining all the Kuwait records and of gathering data from diverse sources for this work. He has only included the rarer species where there is indisputable evidence to support them. In this he has done a good service as the end result is a reliable reference. The details given for each species are written in a very readable style and will meet the needs of both the specialist wanting to get his teeth into the detail and the visiting birder who just wants to know what the chances are of seeing a particular species at any time or place. The whole book is illustrated with about 90 good quality colour photos of birds and habitats. This is the first authoritative checklist of the birds of Kuwait and will fill a gap on the shelves of everyone interested in the birds of the Middle East. Highly recommended.

Card cover, 219 pages (A5). Cost £15, plus £1.50 p+p (UK); £15 plus £3 p+p (Europe); £15 plus £5 p+p (Rest of World); from Michael Briggs, 21 Ramsay Close, Skegness, Lincs., PE25 3PS, UK. Email: mbriggs@gibobs.fsworld.co.uk. *ISBN 10: 09551416-0-5.*

The bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus* has been recorded in 34 different squares, from Jeddah to Mukallah in eastern Yemen, but apart from some reports of juveniles there is no evidence for breeding.

Birds of Kuwait - a portrait by Abdulla Alfadhel (2005)

This book is primarily a pictorial introduction to the birds of Kuwait in Arabic. It is richly illustrated with over 400 colour photos of Kuwait birds, all by the author, all taken in Kuwait and most to a very high standard. The introductory pages are all in Arabic as are the substantial captions to the photos throughout the book. However for each species that is illustrated the scientific name is provided, so those who do not read Arabic can still browse through the pages and know what species are on display. However one is often left feeling a bit frustrated because some of the pictures are so stimulating that the reader really wants to know a bit more about the pictures. For example a question to the author as to what on earth a water rail was doing holding a bedraggled warbler in the water (p 71), produced the remarkable story on page 2. There are many stunning pictures of unusual species so the book is useful as a pictorial reference. The English end of the book, by George Gregory, provides a complete listing of the 380 species that have occurred in Kuwait with their status and Arabic names, an index, as well as a round-up of the 34 best birdwatching sites in Kuwait, with details of what can be seen, when and where. There are also notes on bird protection and the natural environment in Kuwait. One of the best things about this excellent book it that it cannot help but encourage a great number of Kuwaitis and other Arabic readers to take a keener interest in birds. It is understood an English translation may come later.

Hard back, 304 pages. (235 X 280 mm). Published by the author. Details of availability on WWW.Kuwaitbirds.com *ISBN 99906-76-77-1. It is sold in UK by NHBS Environment Bookstore* www.nhbs.com.

Jebel Hafit, A Natural History by Simon Aspinall and Peter Hellyer (2004)

Jebal Hafit is an isolated 17 km long lump of limestone rising to 1300 m. It looms over the town of Al Ain and straddles the border between the UAE and Oman. It has a truly remarkable fauna and flora and has figured in man's history in the region for at least 5000 years. This full colour tribute to the rock is divided into ten chapters dealing with various natural history subjects in the widest sense, including the geology, its caves and archaeology. The main fauna and flora chapters cover vegetation, insects, reptiles, mammals and birds. There are short essays on clam shrimps and the unique invertebrate fauna of a cave system sealed from the outside world for millennia. One of the most recent and exciting discoveries on the mountain has been 450 m of unknown cave passages, shafts and chambers. Stalactites have been dated at 337,000 years old but the cave system itself is very much older. Old enough for an apparently unique invertebrate to survive in isolation. The flora of the Jebal is the richest single site in the Abu Dhabi emirate with 140 species identified, that is 40% of all species in 0.002% of the land area. The birds of the jebal do not differ significantly from other mountain areas of the northern UAE but for an single isolated mountain it is interesting that almost every resident species of the northern Emirates is there. Touristic development of the summit area has taken its toll on the birds and some species have declined in recent years or no longer breed. Others have been introduced by man, like the red -vented and white cheeked bulbuls. Some introductions like the chukar partridge occur naturally elsewhere in the northern Emirates and Musandam. Declines include Egyptian vulture reduced today to only 10% of its former numbers in the mid 20 century, repeating the picture from elsewhere on mainland Arabia. The lappet-faced vulture has not been confirmed to breed for several years. Other potential breeding raptors, such as Bonelli's eagle, kestrel and barbary falcon are faring better. Some 37 other breeding bird species are detailed along with their habitats. Wintering and passage species are also mentioned with short accounts on most, covering status and number. This is a good study of a relatively small single site and may be used as a model for similar site reports elsewhere in the UAE and Arabia. A valuable addition to any environmental library in the region.

Sponsored by the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations. Hardback, 219 pages (245 X 320 mm). Published by and available from the Emirates Natural History Group P O Box 45553, Abu Dhabi UAE ISBN 9948-03-143-1

Dozens of pairs of Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* were colour ringed at Al Wathba lagoons Abu Dhabi as part of a population study (page 11).

Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various journals and newsletters relevant to the Arabian environment in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

Fauna of Arabia Index to Volumes 1-20; Editor-in-Chief Friedhelm Krupp (2005)

Between 1979 and 2004, 20 volumes have been published of the serial publication *Fauna of Saudi Arabia*, which continued as *Fauna of Arabia* from volume 17. In total 358 authors have contributed to the series and no less than 1351 taxa have been introduced as new to science. These are mostly invertebrates but include no less than 44 vertebrates, one of the most surprising of which was the large monitor lizard *Varanus yemenensis* discovered in the south west Arabia highlands and described in 1989. The series has quite rightly become the primary zoological reference work for the Arabian Peninsula

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This index consists of three parts:

a. A systematic index to the scientific names of animals, in alphabetical order (498 pages with at least 100 items indexed on each page, making 50,000+ references);

b. An index to the taxa introduced as new to science in *Fauna of (Saudi) Arabia* (18 pages);

c. An authors' index, listing all the contributors to volumes 1 to 20 (four pages).

The systematic index contains family-group names (family, subfamily, tribe, subtribe), genus-group names (genus, subgenus) and species-group names (species, subspecies). Taxa are listed in alphabetical order. Both valid taxa and synonyms are included. (Categories that do not form part of a scientific name according to the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, such as "forma", "natio", "var." etc., are excluded). Genus- and species-group taxa consisting of more than one word, are listed under each element of their composite name, e.g. *Scorpio maurus fuscus* is listed under three entries: "*fuscus*, *Scorpio maurus*", "*maurus, Scorpio* and "*Scorpio maurus fuscus*". *Scorpio (Hemiscorpio)* is listed under two entries: "*Hemiscorpio, Scorpio* and "*Scorpio*". For each taxon, the volume in which it is mentioned and the page number are listed (e.g. "*deserti, Ammomanes* **6**:26, **14**: 448, **15**: 417, **16**: 75, 78, 86"). The volume in which a taxon appears is given in bold type, followed by the page number in normal roman type for taxa that are only mentioned in the text or are briefly characterised. Where taxa are dealt with in greater detail, page numbers appear in italics, e.g. "*rufescens, Pelecanus* **4**: *478*, **6**: 22, **9**: *461*, **15**: 416" indicates that detailed references to the biology of the pink-backed pelican can be found at volume 4 on page 478 and in volume 9 on page 461. The index to new taxa is arranged in systematic order and includes higher categories starting at the class level. The sequence of taxa follows the Zoological Record taxonomic hierarchy. Names introduced as new to science in the *Fauna of (Saudi) Arabia* include author, year, volume and page number. The authors' index lists all the scientists who contributed to volumes 1 to 20, in alphabetical order. In cases of multiple authorship, both senior authors and co-authors are included. This index is a powerful reference resource to the Arabian fauna.

Hardback, A4 size, 526 pages. The index and issues of The Fauna can be ordered from: Karger Libri AG, Petersgraben 31 CH-4009 Basel, Switzerland, Website: http://www.libri.ch/agency/services/faunaofarabia.htm *Price: Switzerland: Swiss Francs (CHF 159.00) incl. postage, Rest of World: CHF 159.00 plus CHF 35.00 postage. ISBN 3-929907-73-9*

Zoology in the Middle East

Volume 33 (2004) This volume is completely dedicated to the mammals of the Middle East, and gives a good overview of current research projects, many of them conservation-oriented. With 168 pages, the page number of this volume is higher than that of other issues. The preface has been written by David Harrison, author of "The Mammals of Arabia". *Phoenix* readers will be most interested in a. Cunningham, P. L.: Checklist and status of the terrestrial mammals from the United Arab Emirates; b. Shehab, A. H.: Diet of the Eagle Owl, *Bubo bubo*, in Syria; c. Shehab, A. H., A. Daoud, D. Kock & Z. Amr: Small mammals recovered from owl pellets from Syria. There are also papers on hyaena, otters, wild goats, deer and cetaceans. **Volume 34 (2005)** 120 pages. Nothing on birds in this issue. Arabophiles will be interested in a paper on first record of the eel *Anguilla bengalensis* from Arabia in a paper on other fresh water fish in the Hadramaut basin, Yemen and a sun fish *Mola mola* found in the Gulf of Aqaba, new for the Red Sea. **Volume 35 (2005)** Includes 12 main papers and 11 short communications. Unfortunately there is nothing directly relating to Arabian ornithology but there are three useful studies in the short communications section on the long-eared owl in Turkey, the long legged buzzard and crested lark in Iran and recent observations of the great bustard in Turkey. The only paper directly relating to Arabia concerns the ant fauna of Yemen.

ISSN 0939-7140. Available from Kasparek Verlag M^nchhofstr. 16, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. Tel. (+49) 6221 / 47 50 69, Fax (+49) 6221 / 47 18 58. Check www.kasparek-verlag.de *for prices and other information or Email:* Kasparek@t-online.de. *The web site also contains the tables of content and abstracts of the previous issues of Zoology in the Middle East.*

Tribulus

Volume 14.2 Autumn/Winter 2004 Nothing on birds - one paper mentions a new species of viper from UAE/Northern Oman. **Volume 15.1 Spring-Summer 2005** Quite a lot of ornithological interest. Including the first two confirmed records of *Sylvia hortensis jerdoni* from UAE (this is a race that normally winters in south west India and breeds in Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and Pakistan); the first breeding of purple gallinule in UAE (at Al Warsen lake Dubai from April 2004) ; notes on the breeding success of crab plovers in UAE (818 nesting burrows counted at three colonies on two islands off Abu Dhabi) and a Kentish plover survey at Al Wathba lake - where there is a population of 200 pairs recorded. There are other articles on spoonworms, butterflies, palm weevil, ancient archeology and recent archeology (World War 2 air crashes in the UAE).

Available from the Emirates Natural History Group: PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. ISSN 1019-6019.
Email: hellyer@emirates.net.ae.

Al Jebal al Akhdar Initiative - Sub Project 4: Birds. (Report pp. 42) by Jens Eriksen Sultan Qaboos University (2005).

The data on the Oman Central Bird Record for the northern Oman highlands and the information collected during ABBA Survey 35 (page 18) have been used by the author to prepare this comprehensive report on the birds and habitats of this unique region. The report includes an analysis of all records from the region, estimates breeding populations and provides detailed notes on a number of important species, such as the wood pigeon. There is also a systematic list of all species recorded and notes on conservation concerns and eco-tourism with recommendations. There are several maps and some nice photos, including one of a wood pigeon on a nest. It is a pity this report is not more widely available. Privately published by SQU.

Briefly

Announcements of ongoing surveys or the publication of reports etc may be included free of charge.

Arabia gets Smaller Bahrain & Qatar have announced the planned construction in five years time of the world's longest fixed link, a 45 km long connection. This will run from the west coast of Qatar near the Zubarah fortress to the east coast of Bahrain, south of its capital Manama. The link is expected to consist of a number of bridges combined with roads constructed on embankments and will also connect to the King Fahad Causeway between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, thus linking the entire region. Lets hope they can find a few riyals to put in a bird observation terrace half way. Look out for low flying Socotra cormorants.

Namaqua Dove now in Turkey The Namaqua dove *Oena capensis* has spread all over Arabia from the south west of the peninsula since 1975. On 23 May 2005 one was seen at Birecik in south east Turkey. (Source: *MEBirdnet*).

New BirdLife Middle East Office head BirdLife International now has a new head of its Middle East Office in Amman, Ibrahim Khader. Ibrahim has worked in the BirdLife Middle East Office since 2001 mainly on important bird area conservation issues, especially the promotion of friendly agriculture. Previously he worked for IUCN, Jordan's Ministry of the Environment and RSCN. Ibrahim is a biologist specialising in taxonomy and desert ecology and conservation.

Arabic *Birds of the Middle East* An Arabic translation of *Birds of the Middle East* (by Richard Porter *et al*) is now on the web at : *http://birds.rscn.org.jo/elinks.html*. The translation was made by Saeed Mohamed, OSME Vice President and paid for by the RSPB. The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in Jordan put the whole thing together for their widely used Arabic conservation website. One problem is that those with non-Arabic software will have difficulty pulling up the Arabic text but they will still get the flavour. However a hard copy translation is also planned for publication sometime in early 2006. This will be prepared by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL). Many organisations have contributed to the cost of this book including BirdLife International, OSME, the World Land Trust and the Dutch Government.

Socotra's Outer Isles A survey was carried out of the little known outer islands of the Socotra archipelago (Sabouniya, Kaal Faroun, Abd el Kuri, Darsa and Samhah) during 2005 by a team including the Socotra ornithologist Ahmed Saeed Suliman. His most interesting results will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Sandgrouse*.

Persian shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri* is one of the rare seabirds found on a recent survey of breeding birds on Socotra's outer isles

Volunteers wanted in Yemen The Yemen Society for the Protection of Wildlife (YSPW) has a number of ongoing projects which are suitable for overseas volunteers to take part in. If you are interested in helping with environmental and biodiversity surveys or in developing projects, and have a few weeks spare, contact the YSPW Chairman Dr Omar al Saghier and enquire about opportunities; email: *omar.alsaghier@undp.org*.

Iraq training project Under a programme funded by the Canadian Government, BirdLife International have been helping to train Iraqi biologists and conservationists from the Iraq Foundation, for surveys they are now starting to make of the wildlife of the Mesopotamian marshes. These surveys are concentrating on birds, mammals, fish and plants and are covering both the winter and summer seasons. For security reasons the training has been carried out in Syria and Jordan.

SANHS Calendar competition The Saudi Arabian Natural History Society holds a photographic competition every year, usually in June. Photos must be taken in Saudi Arabia. Competitors can enter up to three photos in each of the following categories; traditional architecture, flora and fauna, indigenous people, under the Red Sea, landscape, fun and originality. There is also a 'members choice' prize. There are three prizes in each category but no competitor can win more than one prize in each category. The winning photos are used in the SANHS calendar. Entries for the next competition must be in by mid-May 2006 and will be used in the 2007 calendar. Contact: Beryl F Booth Email: *BoothBF@ngha.med.sa* or SANHS at c/o P O Box 6453, Jeddah 21442, Saudi Arabia.

Arabian Bird Calendar 2006 Since their move from Muscat to Abu Dhabi the benchmark *Oman Bird Calendar* of Hanne and Jens Eriksen has gone regional. Fourteen stunning images of birds. Available from Jens and Hanne Eriksen; Email: *hjoman@emirates.net.ae*.

Colour-ringed and Wing-tagged Birds to Look Out For

Any observations of the birds with colour rings or wing-tags of the species mentioned below should be reported to the contact shown. Reports should include details of the colour and combinations of rings seen, details of letters and numbers on rings, location, date and number of individuals observed. ABBA maintains a database of Arabian ringed and marked birds and a copy of observation reports would be appreciated.

Flamingoes with coloured rings Birds colour ringed at colonies in Iran, Turkey, Italy, France and Spain are likely to turn up in Arabia. Coloured rings will bear a combination of letters, numbers and stripes. Details to Christophe Tourenq; Email: *ctourenq@erwda.gov.ae.* Also on 26 and 28 November 2005 greater flamingos were captured and ringed at al Wathba in the UAE. Two adults, two immatures and a juvenile were ringed with white Darvic (plastic) rings bearing the codes BHTA, BHTB, BHTC, BHTD and BHTF. Four of these birds were also fitted with satellite transmitters. These birds demonstrated that by the end of 2005 that they move considerable distances from day to day within their lower Gulf winter feeding area.

Black Vultures with wing tags Wing-tagged in Armenia, tags with blue with white lettering. Details to Mamikon Ghasabian, Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds, Garegin Njdeh 27/2, 10 Yerevan 375026, Armenia. Email: *armbirds@yahoo.com.*

Imperial Eagle and Steppe Eagles with wing tags From northern Kazakhstan (one has already been reported from Oman). The wing tags are in a variety of colours with a letter-number combination. White-tailed sea eagles have also been tagged in Kazakhstan. Details to Todd Katzner, Email: *tkatzner@imperial.ac.uk* or Evgeny Bragin; Email: *naurzum@mail.kz.*

Sociable Plover colour-ringing scheme Ringed in breeding areas east of Lake Tengiz (50° 35' N, 70° 01' E), central Kazakhstan. Various coloured rings above the tibio-tarsal joint. Details to Dr Will Cresswell, Bute Medical Building, University of St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9TS UK. Tel +44 (0)1334 463010, Email: *will.cresswell@st-andrews.ac.uk.*

Kentish Plover Birds have been colour ringed at Al Wathba (UB25), Abu Dhabi, during 2005. Details to Simon Aspinall, Email: *hudhud10@emirates.net.ae.*

Bubiyan Yields more Secrets

by George Gregory

During 2002 a series of visits were made to the island of Bubiyan (OA36) by members of the Bird Monitoring and Protection Team (BMAPT) Kuwait. These visits were the first ornithological enquiry on the island for almost a century and some very important results were obtained and were summarised in *Phoenix* 19 (Al Nasrallah and Gregory, 2003). From January 2004 to March 2005 a team from the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), comprised of Ron Loughland, Edgardo Delima, Sara Al-Dosary, Matra Al-Mutairy, Jamal Dashti and myself completed a thorough survey of the breeding birds on Bubiyan and the smaller Warba (OA36/OA37) slightly to the north. My thanks go to the team and also to Brian Foster (BF) and Pekka Fagel (PF) for their reports of observation on Bubiyan in 2005. The results of this recent work is shown below.

Bubiyan and Warba lie to the north east of the Kuwait mainland. They are separated from Iraq by narrow channels known as the Khur Shatyanah and Khur Abdullah, from the Kuwait mainland by the Khur as Subiyah and from each other by the Khur Bubiyan (see map in Al Nasrallah and Gregory, 2003). Bubiyan (about 45 km x 25 km) is largely flat, formed of silt and fine sand and not more than 5 m above sea level. Adjacent to the sea, the land is banked up in many places, forming long low ridges and these are covered in low shrubby halophytic vegetation, especially *Suaeda sp.* Bubiyan consists of a main island, mostly to the south and east, and a series of islets to the north and west. Most of the main island seems to be unsuitable for breeding birds, due to human disturbance from use of roads and tracks connected to the newly reopened bridge at Subiyah. Most sea and shore birds appear to breed on the islets to the north and west of the main island, on parts of the main island adjacent to the islets, and on a wrecked ship lying in the Khur as Subiyah. Warba (about 15 km x 4 km), is similar to Bubiyan and has a permanent coastguard station. The waters around the islands are particularly rich in marine life, with the Khur as Subiyah being the breeding ground of various types of shrimps. Fish, crabs and other crustaceans are plentiful, providing abundant food for various species of birds. There are several fishing villages on the Kuwait mainland, along the Khur as Subiyah but, apart from two police posts, there is no permanent human habitation on the islands. Fishermen based in the nearby fishing villages pass through the main khurs, in which there are a number of navigational markers. The smaller khurs can only be negotiated by small shallow-draught boats at high tide and even with these grounding is a recurrent problem.

Details of bird observations during the most recent surveys are shown below.

Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis* Three birds were present amongst breeding western reef herons *Egretta gularis* and grey herons *Ardea cinerea* on Bubiyan on 25 March 2004.

Western reef heron *Egretta gularis* Observed nesting on Bubiyan from 18 March, with eggs and pulli observed from 25 March. On 10 February 2005 adults were on nests unusually early and an estimated 450 breeding pairs were present on Bubiyan. Seven old nests were found on north-eastern Warba in 2004 but future breeding seems unlikely there, due to disturbance.

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea* In 2004 this species was nesting on Bubiyan from 18 March, eggs and pulli were observed from 25

March. An estimated 150 breeding pairs were present. In 2005 birds were on nests from 10 February. At one site two nests had two eggs and two nests had three eggs. Three old nests were found on north-eastern Warba, but future breeding seems unlikely there, due to disturbance.

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* In 2004 this species was nesting on Bubiyan from 18 March, eggs and pulli observed from 15 April. About 75 breeding pairs were present.

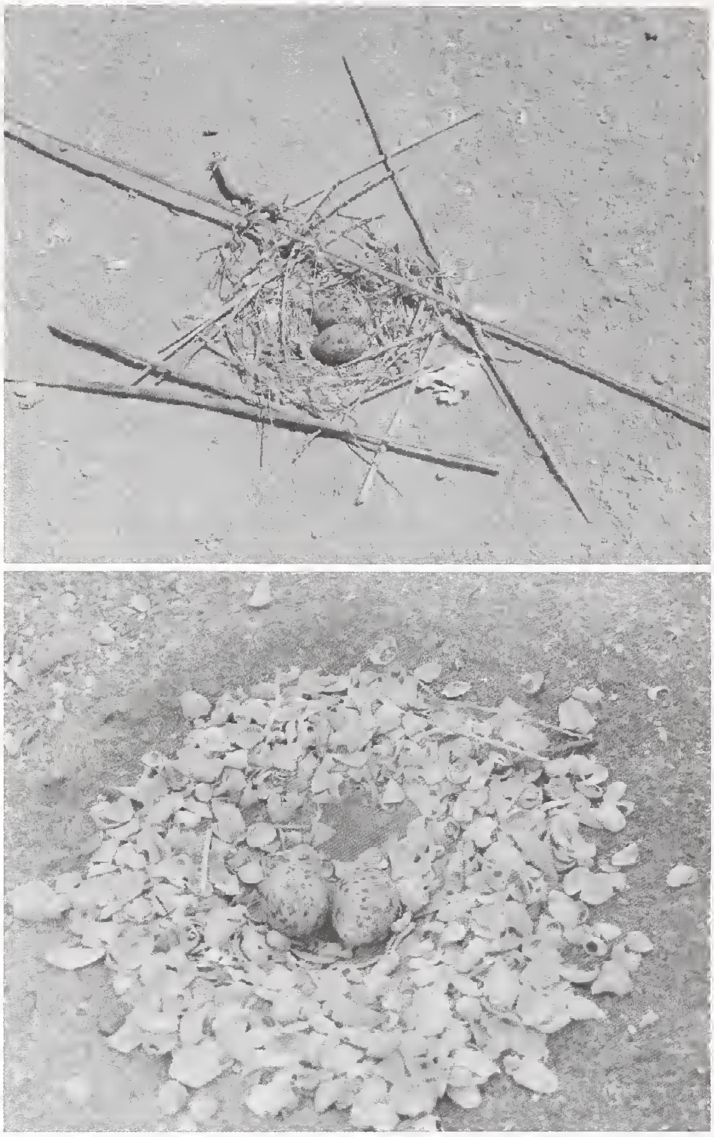
Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* Captain Salem Al-Mulla of the Kuwait Coastguard has advised (*pers. comm.*) that in several of the ten years 1994-2003 he and his men had observed small colonies of greater flamingoes breeding on Bubiyan. A maximum of 65 nests were built in one year, and some had eggs and young. On other occasions the birds built nests but then abandoned them. In 2004 the KISR bird team recorded small numbers of birds on Bubiyan from March to June but found no evidence of breeding. In view of the old breeding records (Al Nasrallah and Gregory, 2003) and this recent news, the species should be recognised as an irregular breeder in Kuwait.

Sooty falcon *Falco concolor* A single bird was seen on a wrecked ship off Bubiyan on 29 April 2004.

Crab plover *Dromas ardeola* In 2004 about 1500 active nest burrows were found on one of the Bubiyan islands which, with the 100 nest burrows on a small islet, makes a total of about 1600 known breeding pairs on the island. In one case two nesting burrows had a common entrance. A number of old nest burrows were discovered on Warba, being eroded away by the sea. Future breeding on that island seems unlikely due to disturbance. In 2005, BF and PF observed 2500 adults at nest holes on Bubiyan on 28 April.

Slender-billed gull *Larus genei* On 28 May 2004 in one area of Bubiyan there were about 1500 pulli in creches (each of up to several hundred pulli), 250 attending adults, 100 nests and 15 eggs. Several similar finds were made at other sites in June 2004. The breeding population was estimated as 1600 pairs, nesting in colonies of 10-250 pairs, usually somewhat apart from other species, in clusters with nests up to one metre apart. Each nest is a shallow depression, lined with *Suaeda* twigs, normally heavily fouled with droppings and situated on the substratum about 10-50 m from khors. Eggs were speckled off-white or pale colour, 2-4 eggs in a clutch. No nests were found on Warba and breeding there seems unlikely in future due to disturbance.

Gull-billed tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* In 25 March 2004, 617 nests were found at various sites on Bubiyan and Warba, many with eggs and young. Many other nests were later found at other sites. The breeding population was estimated as about 800 pairs, nesting in colonies of 10-50 pairs, often near to western reef heron, grey heron and spoonbill colonies. Nests were usually in lines but sometimes in small clusters, up to 10 metres apart. In 2005 employees of KISR observed birds giving alarm calls overhead from 10 February. The nest is a shallow depression, usually lined with *Suaeda* twigs, reed stems, shells or small pieces of driftwood, but sometimes unlined and placed on the substratum, 10 to 50 metres from the khors. Nests are almost always clean and free from droppings. Eggs are speckled off-white or pale colour with 2-4 in a clutch. Chicks vary greatly in colour and may be all browny-grey, dark grey in front and pale buff in rear, white with black speckles, all white or all buff. One happy result of the discovery of this species breeding on Bubiyan is the solving of a mystery nest found on the Hawar islands, Bahrain a few years ago. In his book on the birds of the Hawar island Howard King (King, 1999) included a photo (page 26) of a single nest, taken on 23 June, that he thought was either a slender-billed gull or a gull-billed tern. Neither species having been proved to breed on those islands previously. From experience gained of the nests of both species on Bubiyan it is clear that the clean nest on Hawar can now be identified as that



Examples of gull-billed tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* nests on Bubiyan island.

of gull-billed tern. Slender-billed gulls nest only in colonies and always foul their nests by droppings, but gull-billed terns sometimes nest singly and their nests are always clean.

Caspian tern *Sterna caspia* On 15 April 2004 a colony was found on Bubiyan of about 300 adults with 250 nests containing eggs and a few chicks. The colony overlapped a colony of swift terns *S. bergii*.

Swift tern *Sterna bergii* On 15 April 2004 a colony was found on Bubiyan of about 600 nests with eggs and a few young. The colony overlapped a Caspian terns colony - see above.

Lesser crested tern *Sterna bengalensis* A maximum of 320 birds were recorded on Bubiyan on 4 February 2004 but no evidence of breeding was found that year.

References: • Al Nasrallah K. and G Gregory (2003). Bubiyan island Kuwait, 2002. *Phoenix* 19:5-7. • King, H. 1999. *The Breeding Birds of Hawar*. Ministry of Housing, Bahrain.

George Gregory, Gibraltar Point Field Station, Gibraltar Road, Skegness, Lincs., PE24 4SU). Email: ggregory71@lycos.com.

Wadi Rijaf, Jebal Bura'a, Yemen (an update)

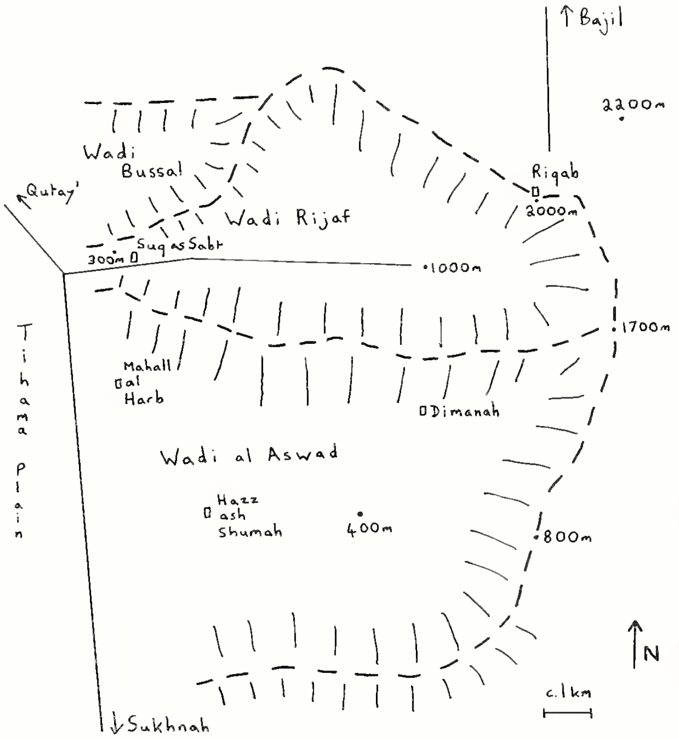
by Peter Cowan

The flora and fauna of Wadi Rijaf (JA06) contains many Afrotropical species and includes remnants, of extreme conservation concern, of the previous valley forests of the Tihama foothills (*Phoenix* 20: 11-12). I visited Jebal Bura'a again, 12 - 29 April 2005, but concentrated on the fauna of the Wadi Bussal area and of the northern slopes of Wadi al Aswad, areas now to be included in the Wadi Rijaf protected area.

The Wadi Bussal area is well wooded and has riparian forest, as Wadi Rijaf. It lies just north of the entrance to the Rijaf valley but is considerably smaller in extent. There is a network of narrow paths within. The northern slopes of Wadi al Aswad abut the southern rim of Wadi Rijaf and are extensive. Easiest access is via a few motorable (4WD) tracks in Wadi al Aswad near the hamlets of Mahall al Harb and Hazz ash Shumah, then on foot up the slopes. A difficult 4WD track leaves east from Hazz ash Shumah and reaches Dimanah, a hamlet on the northern slopes in the east of Wadi al Aswad (beware of flash floods, the rain can be torrential). Some gulleys along the northern slopes of the Aswad valley are tree-lined but in general the vegetation there appears mainly open shrub-land.

Many of the species of Wadi Rijaf can be seen in the new areas e.g. hamadryas baboon *Papio hamadryas*, Arabian partridge *Alectoris melanocephala*, red-eyed dove *Streptopelia semitorquata*, African grey hornbill *Tockus nasutus*, shining sunbird *Nectarinia habessinica* and black-crowned tchagra *Tchagra senegala*, though personal highlights were a pale morph jacobin cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* and daylight views of two male Lichtenstein's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* on the ground.

In April 2005, a gatehouse was under construction at the entrance to Wadi Rijaf and a few 'protect wildlife' signs had been erected. Also, work was underway on upgrading the 5 km long track that winds its way east up through the lower elevations of Wadi Rijaf. The track was certainly in need of some improvement as it was only motorable in some sections by using extreme heroics. Unfortunately, the work involved track widening, though there was to be no dynamiting and spoil was to be removed.

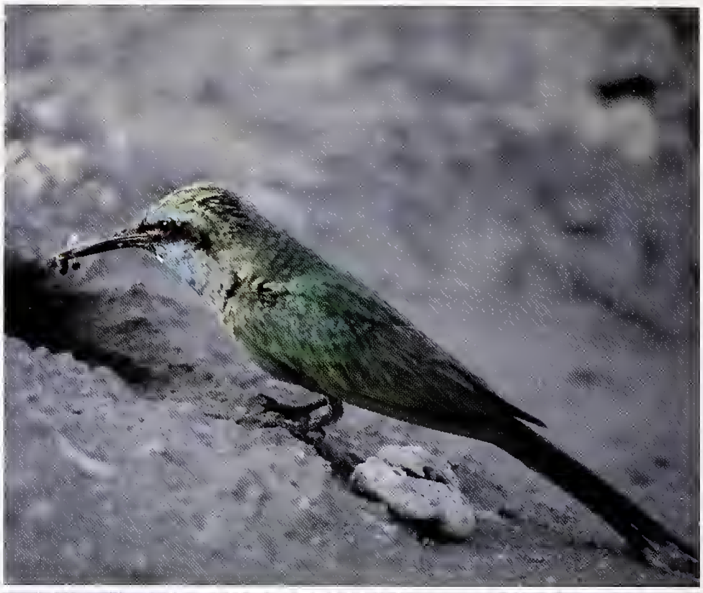


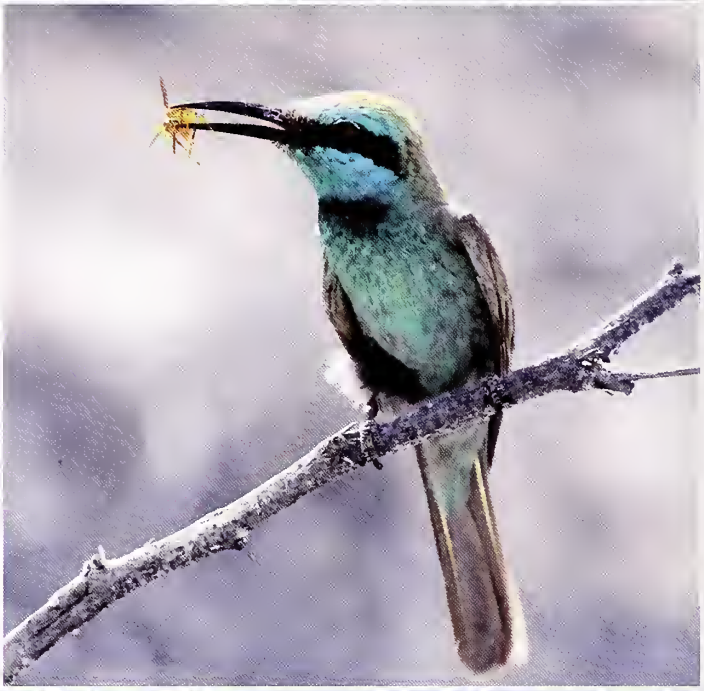
Map of western and south western Jebal Bura'a Yemen

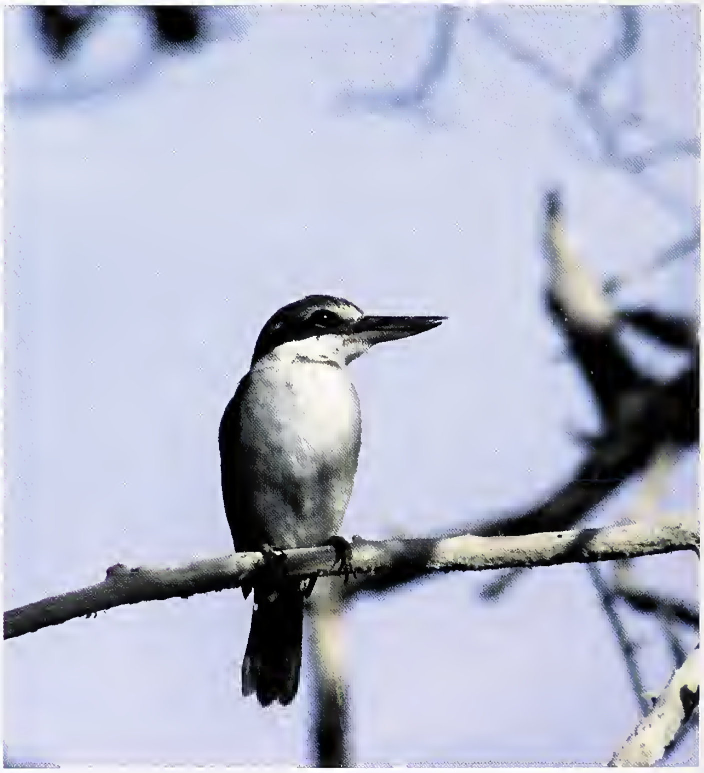
Tony Miller, of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, and Abdul Wali Al Khulaidi were subsequently in Wadi Rijaf and estimated that some 30% of the richest forest has been destroyed by the roadworks. Springs along the roadside had been dynamited and spoil was tipped not only into the forest but also has filled the wadi pools. Hopefully road spoil will be removed from Wadi

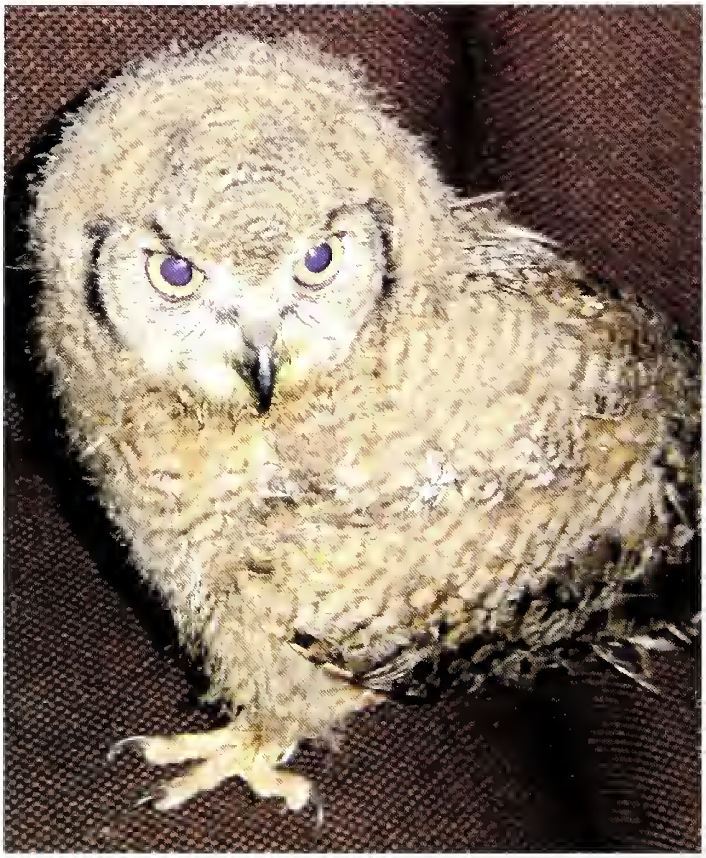
(Continued on page 16)

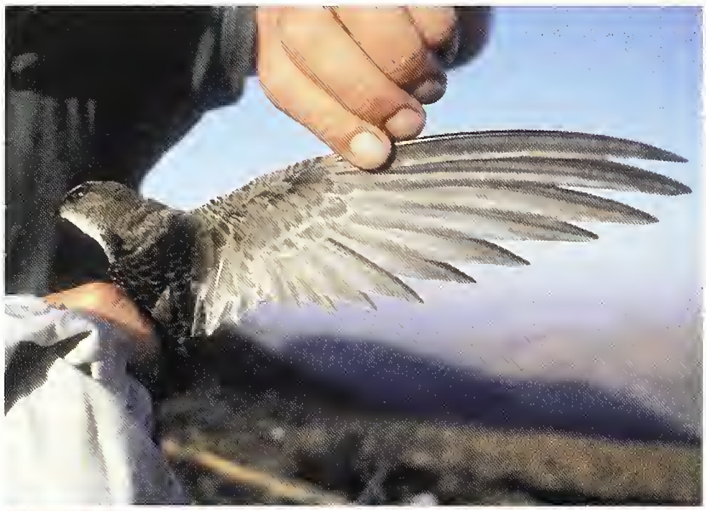
Clockwise 1. 1 & 2. Little green bee-eater *Merops orientalis* at nest hole and bringing food for nestlings Dubai, see page 4. (Photos Mohammed Arfan Asif). 3. White-collared kingfisher *Halcyon chloris* at Khor Kalba, UAE see page 27. (Photo Bernard Pleasance). 4. Spotted eagle owl chick *Bubo africanus* handed into Al Ain Zoo, supposedly from the Dibba area, see page 27. (Photo Mohammed Reza Khan). 5. Forbes-Watson's swift *Apus berliozi*, trapped on Socotra, showing pale throat, crescentic marks on underside and pale edges to underwing coverts, see page 22. (Photo Richard Porter).



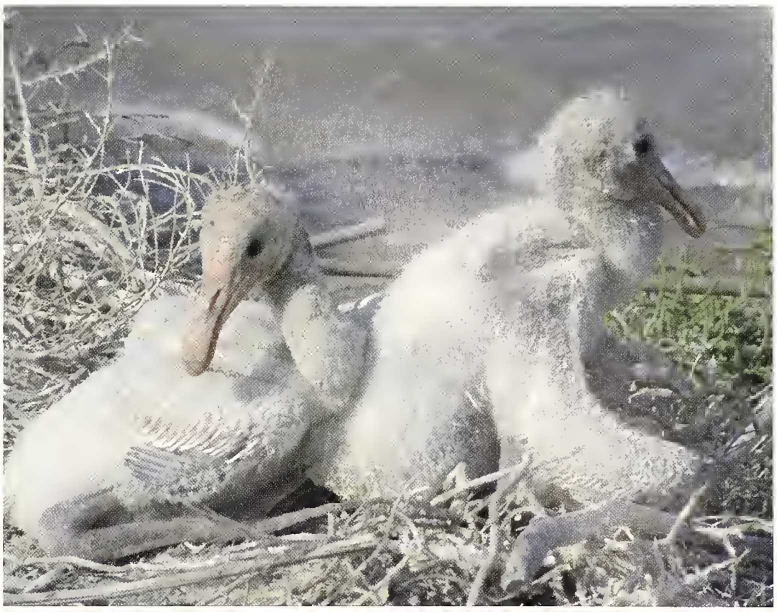


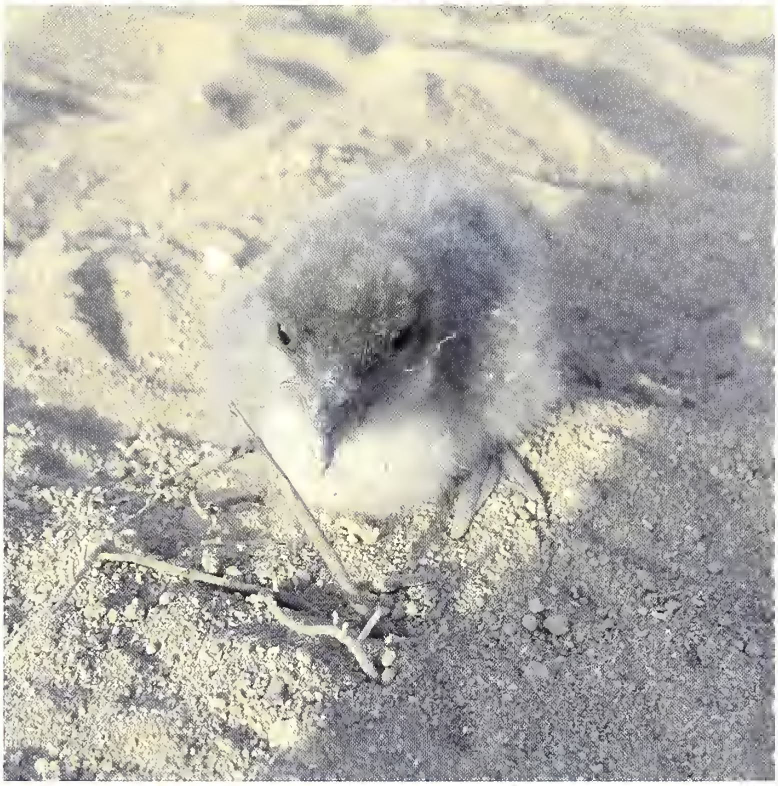


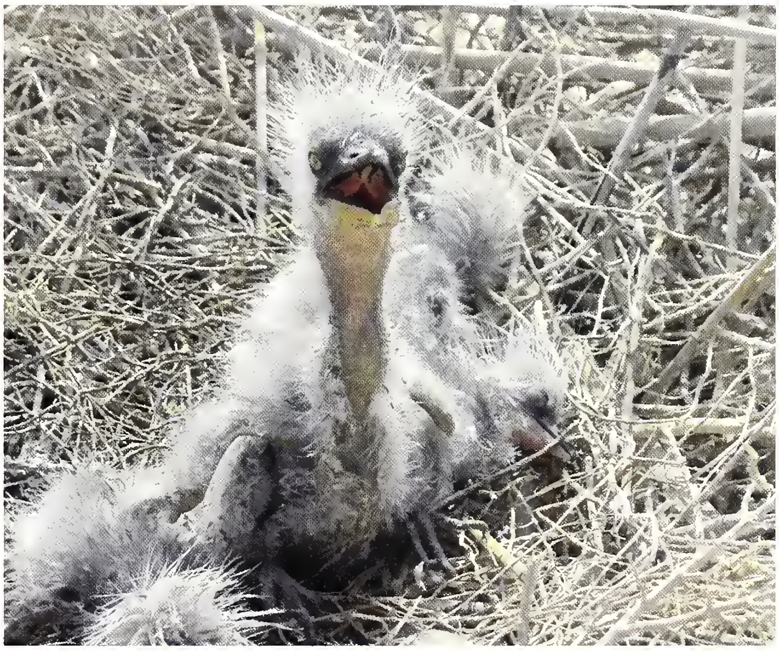


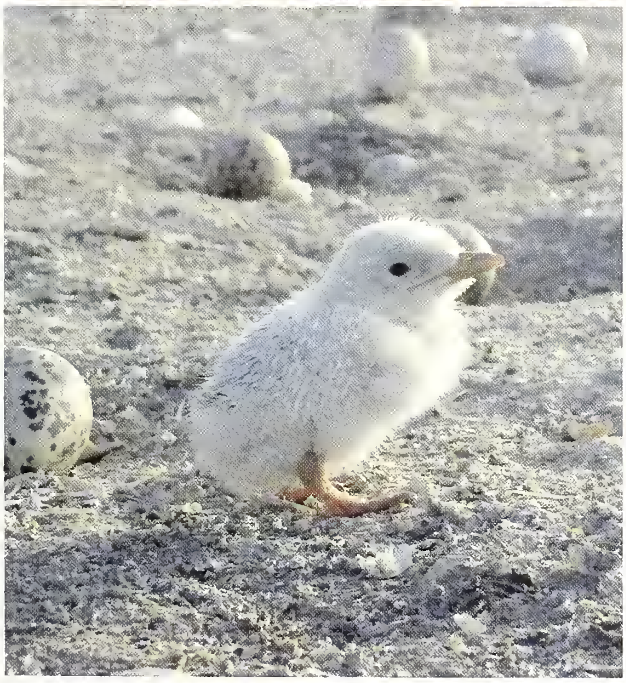


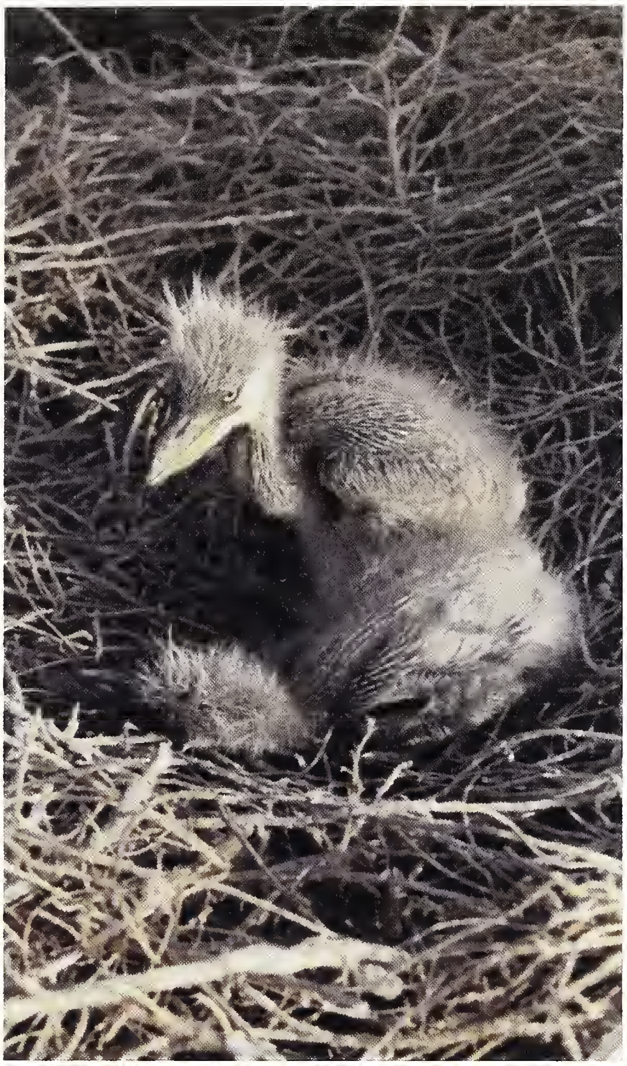
Bubiyan chicks, see page 11. Clockwise 1. Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* nesting on pads of suaeda close to the shore. (Photo Essa Ramadan). 2. Crab plover *Dromas ardeola*, this chick was not removed from a nest burrow it was found above ground. (Photo Essa Ramadan). 3. Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*. (Photo Essa Ramadan). 4. Swift tern *Sterna bergii*. (Photo Essa Ramadan) 5. Reef heron *Egretta gularis*. (Photo George Gregory).











Rijaf in the near future to give the affected forest some chance of recovery. There is now the tarmac road in Wadi Rijaf, the gatehouse and gate are in place and there are "Bura'a Natural Protected Area" (the agreed name) signs, though BNPA has not been officially declared yet (Omar Al-Saghier, John Clarke, Tony Miller, Abdul Karim Nasher, David Stanton *in litt*).

BNPA is still an essential stop on a birding tour of western Yemen (*Phoenix* 20: 11-12). It is important though that visitors demonstrate that BNPA is worth protecting : spend some money in the immediate area surrounding BNPA e.g. buy some provisions, hire a guide, rent a donkey and handler, use the local cafes.

P. J. Cowan, School Croft, Timmerlum Lane, Newburgh, Aberdeenshire AB41 6BG, Scotland. Email: desertmammal@yahoo.com.

A further mangrove white-eye (*Zosterops*) population in the Arabian Red Sea

by Stephen F Newton

Recently, the identity of the problematic population of white-eyes in the mangroves of Mahawt Island (YA18) in eastern Oman was resolved. Eriksen *et al.* (2001) considered them, on the basis of plumage and mitochondrial DNA, to be an outlying population of the Oriental white-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*, which is the common white-eye of much of the Indian Subcontinent.

During an avifaunal survey of Red Sea mangrove stands in southwest Saudi Arabia, Peter Symens and myself discovered white-eyes in ABBA squares HB12, HB13 and HA13. The sites were located between the villages of Shuqaiq and Amq, approximately midway between Jizan and al Qunfudah. This represents a range of approaching 100 km, though it may extend further to the north given the abundant mangrove stands in the Ghubbat al Hasan (GB16) and al Lith (GA17) areas.

The birds were initially observed in March 1994 and then again in May of the same year. However, in both cases actual views were very poor and none were caught in the mist nets which were set to trap white-collared kingfishers *Halcyon chloris* and *Acrocephalus* warblers, the principal focus of our studies. Our impression was that they were smaller and brighter plumaged than the nearby montane populations of Abyssinian white-eye *Z. abyssinica arabs* with which we were very familiar. During a visit to our main study site on 1 December 1994, we succeeded in catching two white-eyes. Their biometrics are given in Table 1 below, alongside typical values (n=100+) for montane birds handled in the same time period. This comparison confirms their small size; photographs and tiny blood samples were also taken. Little further fieldwork was done in the area in 1995 but further efforts were made to catch more of these mangrove white-eyes in early 1996. On 20 February two birds were seen at the north end of the known range (HA13) and the following morning one was caught. A description (below) and detailed wing formula were taken. Further searches were made to the north, west of Muzaylif (GB15) and Ras Muhaysin (GB16) but no more mangrove white-eyes were recorded.

Description Crown and mantle yellowish olive-green, somewhat brighter on rump; throat bright canary lemon-yellow extending down the ventral keel line. Remaining breast, flanks, belly fawn-buff, vent area and undertail coverts sulphurous yellow. Prominent white eye-ring around a rich chestnut-brown iris. Lores bright yellow. Flight feathers medium grey-brown edged olive-green, tail (worn) brown edged yellowy olive-green. Legs and feet flesh coloured and claws flesh-grey. Proximal end of bill flesh coloured, distal half flesh-grey especially on upper mandible

Discussion Although blood samples were sent to a German laboratory who had expressed interest in the taxonomic problem, no information was forthcoming and contact was lost with the staff involved. Thus, the description and biometrics are the only material available on which a taxonomic prognosis can be made at the present time. Other East African species and races need to be considered as well as the Oriental white-eye. The former include other races of Abyssinian white-eye, montane white-eye *Z. poliogaster* and yellow white-eye *Z. senegalensis*. Of these, only the range of Abyssinian includes coastal lowlands in Kenya (Zimmerman *et al.* 1999) and in Sudan they are common in *Acacia* bush and woodland in Red Sea hills (Nikolaus 1987). Neither account mentions occurrence in mangroves. Usually, such races are more 'solid' yellow forms when compared to the Red Sea mangrove birds. Oriental white-eye remains a strong candidate but differences in the colour of the lores could rule this out.

Clearly DNA evidence may be necessary to unravel the bird's identity and efforts are underway to locate the 'lost' blood samples. Without a solution, for the purpose of the forthcoming ABBA Atlas, they may have to be treated as 'mangrove white-eye sp'.

Acknowledgements Sincere thanks to Peter Symens who accompanied me on the initial survey; subsequently Anne Newton, Simon Aspinall and Graham Lobley all helped in the field. Senior staff of the Birds & Wetlands Section in NCWCD, Riyadh and at NWRC, Taif are thanked for their support.

References: • Eriksen, H., J. Eriksen, S. Al-Saadi & D. E. Sargeant. 2001. The discovery of Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa* in Oman. *Sandgrouse* 23(2):130-133. • Nikolaus, G. 1987. *Distribution atlas of Sudan's birds with notes on habitat and status*, Bonner Zoologische Monographien Nr 25. • Zimmerman, D. A., Turner, D. A. & Pearson, D. J. 1999. *Birds of Kenya & Northern Tanzania*. Helm/A. C. Black, London.

Table 1: White-eye Biometrics

	Typical *Z. abyssinica arabs*	**Mangrove bird (Ring No 2746)**	**Mangrove bird (Ring No 2747)**
Mass (g)	9-10	7.5	7.1
Wing length (mm)	58-60	54	54
Tail length (mm)	40	38	39
Tarsus (mm)	16.5-17	15.7	15.4
Head + bill (mm)	27-28	25.9	26.6
Bill length (to feathering, mm)	11	9.2	9.8
Bill length (to skull, mm)	12.5-13	11.9	12.5
Bill depth (mm)	3.4	3.1	3.1

Stephen F. Newton Dunkineely, Tomcoyle Upper, Ballyduff, Ashford, Co. Wicklow, Ireland. Email: snewton@birdwatchireland.org.

ABBA Survey 34: Wadi al Jawf, North-central Yemen

By Michael C Jennings

For a few days in February 2005 I was lucky to be able to get to the Wadi al Jawf area in north central Yemen. This region was the largest contiguous area in Arabia, outside of the core Empty Quarter, that had not been visited by an ABBA Survey. It was left until 2005 for a reason - it is has a bad reputation as bandit country and it was consequently difficult to make arrangements to get there. It has rarely been visited by outsiders and most of the records on the ABBA database from the region were from Harry Philby who travelled through the district, from Najran (KA11) to the Hadramaut, in autumn 1936 and collected a series of birds.

My survey started in the town of al Hazm (KB09), also known as Al Jawf, in the Wadi al Jawf, which runs from the north west towards the Hadramaut. Here I met the team of four bedouin guides who were to be my companions. So many were needed to ensure I had all the right tribal connections whilst moving around in the area. The plan was to spend about two weeks between al Hazm the Saudi border and Sadah (JB10). In al Hazm itself there were a few alpine swift *Apus melba*, Arabian warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena*, shining sunbird *Nectarinia habessinica* and Lichtenstein's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*. From al Hazm we travelled due east for about 140 km, partly down the Wadi Jawf, which is full of sodom apple trees *Caloptropis procera* with granite inselbergs to the north. This is a very arid region where we found only one small settlement at Marazig (LA09) which had a few crops, dates and fruit trees. Here there were a couple of Arabian babbler *Turdoides squamiceps* and Rüppell's weaver *Ploceus galbula* which were a little bit of a surprise. Further east it becomes flatter and sandier as the edge of the Empty Quarter is approached. At the basalt hillock eminence of Abraq Khalilah (LB09) we spent some five hours and I saw two species, desert lark *Ammomanes deserti* and brown- necked raven *Corvus ruficollis*. We turned north at that point towards the dunes and then after 50 km or so, turned back due west to the Wadi Khabb (KB10-LA10). The desert to the east was empty of people but Wadi Khabb is well populated, with many large houses set along both banks of the steep sided wadi, which is about 300 metres wide. It had good fringing tree cover of acacia and *Zizyphus*. Birds here included crowned sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus*, African silverbill *Euodice cantans*, sand partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*, and Tristram's grackle *Onychognathus tristramii*. The people of this part of Yemen are as friendly as elsewhere in the country but the region is still highly tribalised and lacks effective government institutions. In Wadi Khabb it was made clear that they did not like outsiders and told us we would not be permitted to travel further west towards Sadah. We had no alternative but to turn south and go back to al Hazm, this was through some not very interesting low hills. 'Plan B' was to go west from al Hazm to Sadah (that is south of the Wadi Khabb) but we had a couple of warning shots fired in our direction whilst we camped west of the town which encouraged my small 'army' to decide that we had reached the end of the trip! So after only five days and six atlas squares I had to cancel my further plans for Sadah and other squares in the region.

The area visited was one of low species diversity. Altogether in the six squares I had 27 potential breeding species. Al Hazm square had the most with 17 species. Notable records included the second desert eagle owl *Bubo bubo* record for Yemen (they are probably widespread along the rocky southern edge of the Empty Quarter) and range extensions for the endemic Arabian red-legged partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* and Arabian serin *Serinus rothschildi*. One bird I did not see was the Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto* which has clearly not yet got to these parts in its surge across Arabia from the north east. Records collected included the first ever from atlas square LB10 and nine and 13 species respectively from squares KA10 and KB10, where only one species had been recorded previously. Philby collected 12 potential breeders during his trip but the amazingly thing is his collection included four species, Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni*, bar- tailed desert lark *Ammomanes cincturus*, hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes*, and hooded wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* that I did not even see, possibly reflecting less arid conditions in 1936.

I spent the remainder of my time in safer places, visiting the highlands, Jebal Bura'a and the Tihama. Some notable observations in those places included a pair of bearded vultures *Gypaetus barbatus* at a possible nest site, a busy night on Jebal

Bura'a (JA06) with Hume's owl, *Strix butleri*, African scops owl *Otus senegalensis*, little owl *Athene noctua* and mountain nightjar *Caprimulgus poliocephalus* all calling. I think the mountain nightjar record (I heard probably three or four individuals calling, at only about 800 m) is the first record for Yemen but if anyone else has records of this species in the country I would be interested in having details. There was a highly synchronised breeding colony of Arabian golden sparrow *Passer euchlorus* in Wadi Hayran (JA09), comprising about 2000 pairs.

I gave a talk on the survey in Sana'a to a joint meeting of the Yemen Society for the Protection of Wildlife and the Yemen Ornithological Society.

A checklist of all birds seen is available (Email: *arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com*) This list will appear on the OSME website in due course.

This survey needed a great deal of planning and assistance in Yemen from a number of people. I am particularly grateful to David and Sharon Stanton for much work on my behalf in making necessary arrangements, particularly logistic and financial and for their hospitality whilst in Sana'a. I also wish to thank Yousef Mohageb of Arabian Ecotours for all arrangements he made for a vehicle and my team in al Hazm and for hastily sorting out another vehicle and driver to complete the unplanned trip to the highlands and Tihama. Omar al Saghier also kindly gave much help with credentials and contacts.

The bar-tailed desert lark *Ammomanes cincturus* was collected by Philby in Wadi al Jawf in 1936 but was not found there in 2005

ABBA Survey 35: Jebal Akhdar and Northern Oman

By Michael C Jennings

I spent seven weeks in northern Oman during March and April 2005. The first three weeks I travelled widely with my partner Carol Qirreh, mainly in the eastern and western Hajjar ranges. After Carol returned home I made a structured study of the birds of the Jebal Akhdar area, as a contribution to an ongoing environmental project of the Sultan Qaboos University. On Jebal Akhdar I was accompanied for a few days by Salim Al Saadi, Director of Biodiversity, Nature Conservation in the government department responsible for environmental issues and on another occasion by Jens and Hanne Eriksen for a couple of days.

The Jebal Akhdar study looked at three separate adjoining regions; the Ghubrah Bowl (XB23), the Saiq Plateau (XB23) and Jebal Shems (XA23), in an attempt to determine which birds are present in each of the three areas and attempt to quantify the populations, comparing results to the survey carried out by Michael Gallagher in 1975 (Gallagher, 1977). Ghubrah bowl is an enclosed plain at an average elevation of about 700 m, surrounded by mountains on all sides rising to over 2000 m. The Saiq Plateau is at about 2000-2400 m and Jebal Shems rises to just over 3000 m. Data was collected on breeding birds in survey squares equivalent to one twelfth degree (5') square (ie 36 squares to each ABBA half degree square).

The Ghubrah bowl covers about 140 sq km, it is arid but has small cultivated areas mostly on the steep sides of the bowl. It has a good cross section of eastern Arabian species. Species present there, but not found in the highlands, were Lichtenstein's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (locally scarce) and yellow-throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*, which arrived in the bowl from its winter quarters in early April. One surprisingly numerous species present was the striated scops owl *Otus brucei* which was calling at every campsite and the estimated population (extrapolated from counts and habitat data) for Ghubrah was over 200 pairs. On the Saiq Plateau, which has much juniper above about 2200 m, numerous records were obtained of wood pigeon *Columba palumbus* the local speciality. These mountains are the only place where it breeds in Arabia. The first nest and eggs reported for the species in Arabia were photographed, indeed five nests were found altogether and notes made of the species habitat, food, behaviour and breeding behaviour. A pair of short-toed eagles *Circaetus gallicus* were seen displaying and pallid swift *Apus pallidus* were numerous, the latter with a combined estimated breeding population in the three areas of some 2500 pairs. Long-billed pipit *Anthus similis* numbers increased markedly during March and April, in agreement with the view that they winter locally at lower altitudes. The juniper area of the Saiq plateau is being proposed as a UNESCO world heritage site and it was therefore a great shock to see uncontrolled topsoil extraction in this fragile habitat. It was doubly shocking to realise that the soil was being trucked to a nearby government farm!

Table 1: Estimate breeding populations (pairs) in the three Jebal al Akhdar zones studied

	Ghubrah	**Saiq**	**Shems**	**Total**
Egyptian vulture	1-2	5-10	5-10	16
Lappet-faced vulture	NR	*<5*	*<5*	*8*
Short-toed eagle	NR	*1*	*1*	*2*
Bonelli's eagle	NR	NR	**1-2**	2
Kestrel	1-2	<5	1-2	6
Barbary falcon	NR	NR	**1-3**	2
Grey francolin	100-200	200	<10	350
Arabian partridge	NR	*100*	*300*	*400*
Sand partridge	50-100	30-50	<50	140
Lichtenstein's sandgrouse	**100-200**	NR	NR	150
Rock dove	10-50	300	100	400
Wood pigeon	50-100	300	200	575
Eurasian collared dove	**5-10**	NR	NR	10
Palm dove	1400	5000	1000	7000
Striated scops owl	140-280	<50	<50	260
Little owl	NR	NR	**10-30**	15
Pallid swift	500	1000	1000	2500
Little green bee-eater	**<20**	NR	NR	10
Desert lark	1200	1000	800	3000
Pale crag martin	150	300	100	550
Long-billed pipit	40	1000	1400	2500
Yellow-vented bulbul	1400	8000	3000	12000
Hume's wheatear	200	500	300	1000
Graceful warbler	<40	30	NR	50
Scrub warbler	NR	*100*	*100*	*200*
Arabian babbler	140	500	100	700
Purple sunbird	400	500	50	900
Great grey shrike	**15**	NR	NR	15
Brown-necked raven	NR	*<15*	*<10*	*10*
House sparrow	1500	3000	100	4500
Yellow-throated sparrow	**200**	NR	NR	200
House bunting	40	500	100	600

Bold = Species recorded in one zone only. ***Italicised*** = Species found in the highlands only. NR = Not recorded

At Jebal Shems the official passes to the summit (which is a military area) that Jens Eriksen had arranged with great difficulty, unfortunately did not persuade the guard on the gate to let us in. This was a great pity as the summit area is rarely visited and of special scientific interest. However we were allowed half way up to 2400 m. The strict arrangements for visiting the summit are probably to the overall benefit of the environment of the mountain as tourists are taking quiet a toll on the tracks and trees and causing considerable disturbance at 2000 m. On Jebal Shems Bonelli's eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*, barbary falcon *Falco pelegrinoides* and lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* were recorded, also little owl *Athene noctua*. Striated scops owls were a lot less numerous here than at Ghubrah. A few records of Arabian red-legged partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* were obtained including one bird trapped in a mist net. There is not a wide spectrum of species on the mountain, for example compared to similar altitudes in south west Arabia. During four weeks in April and several other days in March only a total of 31 potential breeding species were recorded in the three regions visited, 24 each in Ghubrah and Saiq and 26 on Shems. For 21 species firm evidence was collected for actual or probable breeding.

The results compared generally well with Michael Gallagher's survey in 1975 although there were inevitable differences. He noted records of eagle owl *Bubo bubo* and Indian silverbill *Euodice malabarica* on the jebal which I did not record. On the other hand since 1975 it is now clear that lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*, barbary falcon *Falco pelegrinoides* and little owl *Athene noctua* are part of the mountain avifauna. The graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis* and purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* are breeding birds at 2000+ m and striated scops owl are common rather than only suspected as they were previously.

Migrants were extremely scarce during the whole of April in the region, a situation apparently reflected in other parts of Oman this spring. Only 22 migrants/winter visitors were recorded with not a single swallow *Hirundo rustica* - which must be some sort of record. The visitors included nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*, blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, woodchat shrike *Lanius senator* and red-tailed shrike *Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides* all singing in the study area.

The table provides an estimate of the population levels (pairs) of breeding species present in the three study zones. The numbers have been extrapolated from counts and local area population assessments.

Separate notes elsewhere in this issue of *Phoenix* deal with the first breeding in Arabia of the red-tailed shrike *Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides* and some details of the wood pigeon observations. The 'official' report of the Jebal al Akhdar survey has been prepared by Dr Jens Eriksen of SQU , see details on page 10.

The April Survey of Jebal Akhdar was carried out with the support of the SQU and I am extremely grateful to Prof Reginald Victor, Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies and Research, SQU, for his encouragement and facilities to complete the survey. I am also especially appreciative of all the help provided by Jens and Hanne Eriksen in planning the survey, their company on Jebal Shems and hospitality for myself and Carol in Muscat. My thanks also go to Salem al Saadi for his company on Saiq and arrangements he made on my behalf to make the survey a success. Nizwa Municipality provided very comfortable accommodation for me on the Saiq Plateau for the nights not spent in the field.

Reference: • Gallagher, M., 1977. Birds of Jabal Akhdar, *in* The Scientific Results of the Oman Flora and Fauna Survey 1975, *J. Oman Stud. Spec. Report*, p 27-58.

Wood Pigeons in the Jebal al Akhdar, Northern Oman

by Michael C Jennings

The wood pigeon *Columba palumbus* only breeds in Arabia in the mountains of northern Oman. The majority of the Omani population is thought to inhabit the summit areas of the Jebal al Akhdar (XA23, XB23). There is very little information available on the biology and behaviour of the species in Arabia. This contribution is prepared from the several records obtained of the species during the survey of the region (page 18), and include notes on breeding, behaviour and diet.

The observations gained indicate that the species occupies undisturbed, well wooded hillsides, valleys and open parklands, mostly above about 2100 m. They were found calling and presumably nesting from about 1700 m on the slopes of the Ghubrah Bowl and Saiq Plateau in most quiet areas where there is good tree cover. Their distribution more or less follows the distribution of the juniper *Juniperus excelsa* but this is may be a coincidence rather than indication that the species is in some way dependent on juniper. It does eat juniper berries and nests and roosts in juniper trees but this is just one of a range of berry trees that it exploits in that same habitat. The juniper zone includes large numbers of the wild olive *Olea europaea* and buut trees *Monotheca buxifolia* and bushes of *Lycium shawii* the berries of which have all been previously recorded as eaten in Oman by this pigeon.

The most notable point about the pigeon is that it is difficult to find and observe which is probably because it is extremely shy and tends to keep a very low profile within its chosen habitat. This is no doubt due to it being good to eat and having been hunted for a very long time by the local people. Some indications of its shyness are found in its behaviour when compared to the species in the United Kingdom where it is a very common bird. For example the call of Omani birds is considerably softer than the call uttered by UK birds. Most calls are given from cover during the first two hours after dawn and in the late afternoon but it was once heard an hour before dawn and also after sunset. The wing clap display, which was seen on a number of occasions, includes a much shallower rise and fall profile and it is given only once, compared to the several undulations usual in the UK. On their escape flight from nests they tend to leave trees relatively quietly (unlike the noisy escape of UK birds) and fly low, making good use of trees and rocks for cover during their escape. On one occasion a male cooing and wing-clapping provoked two others to coo and wing-clap nearby. During the survey five nests were located (13-22 April) in juniper, olive and buut trees, nests were situated between 4-7 m above ground. Four of the nests were more robustly built than is typical for the species in the UK. The breeding population for the three zones was estimated at 575 pairs.

During April 2005 this pigeon was eating the berry of the nimpt tree *Sageretia spiciflora* which was producing large numbers of very sweet, deep purple, berries from the first week in April until about 25 April, when most had gone. The berry is much favoured by several bird species both residents and migrants being seen to take it. Birds eating this fruit produce deep purple faeces. In the case of the pigeon, rocks under roosts sites were very heavily stained purple with these droppings so nimpt is clearly an important food item at this time. Nimpt is found from about 1800 m upwards but mostly above 2000. Nimpt should not to be confused with the fruit of the buut tree which also produces a deep purple berry but later in May- June. Both fruits are much collected for human consumption. In early April 2005 (and in March 2002; *pers obs*) the wood pigeon was observed to visit lowland wadies in the Ghubrah Bowl, Wadi Bani Hirras and Wadi Muaydin, at about 5-600 m, to feed on the fruit of the Elb tree *Zizyphus spinachristi* which are common there. There was no evidence that they take the fruit of the endemic *Zizyphus hajarensis* which is found from about 1800 m upwards, possibly because it has a central stone that is much larger and harder than that of *Z. spinachristi.*

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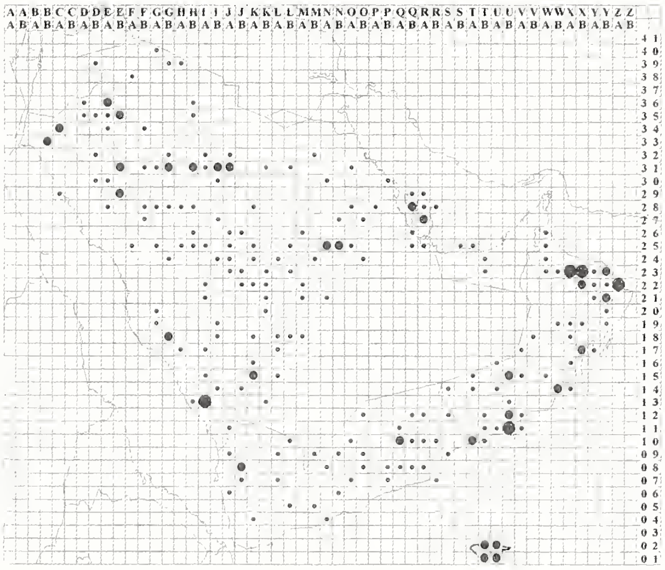
Half Hour Transect Censuses

Since the first ABBA surveys data has not only been collected on spacial distribution by half degree square but also quantitative data on birds has been collected by a variety of census techniques. Censuses have been carried out in an attempt to clarify numbers of each species, particularly the more common ones, in a finite area and to be able to compare birds in different types of habitats and specific sites with those in other corners of the peninsula.

Census techniques that have been used include simple linear transect counts, either driven or walked, over measured distances, timed spot counts, specific counts of seabirds or waterfowl and a formula driven sample count to determine the number of birds inhabiting individual irrigation pivots. Census data from a variety of others workers collecting quantitative information on Arabian birds has also been added to the ABBA census files. The most frequently used transect method has been timed (half hour) walked transects carried out at dawn. These have now be made at about 300 hundred localities throughout Arabia. The transects provide a series of snapshots over the whole ABBA period of birds present in a wide variety of habitats at different times of the year. The information collected will be a useful baseline on how a local avifaunas change over the years. Changes result from different land use, such as the growth of irrigated agriculture and urban creep, as well as local climatic issues and global warming. The transect data will also help to shed light on the rate at which those species that are currently extending their range in Arabia can colonise new areas.

These transects have been carried out at dawn for a reason - it is by far the best time of the day to find resident birds in any habitat. At dawn they are usually vocal and active, especially if they are breeding. In many areas, as the hot weather approaches, birds become much quieter and less active even an hour after dawn and in some cases difficult to find by midday. Censuses at any time other than dawn can produce misleading results.

The distribution of half hour early morning transect censuses plotted to ABBA squares, can be seen on the map (this page). On that map the large dots denote those squares where six or more censuses have been carried out and the medium sized dots are squares where 2-5 censuses have been made. Small dots have only a single census in the square.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Of course in any census programme the more data collected the more useful the whole becomes. The half hour transect database will continue to be added to during future ABBA surveys. However anyone interested in doing this sort of fieldwork can contribute to the database by carrying out these surveys themselves. They can be provided with a pack of instructions on how to conduct the transect. These are very simple instructions with a few dos and don'ts. In a nutshell they can be carried out anywhere and you do not need any maps or special equipment - other than a GPS to ensure the site is located precisely for any future re-census.

Like all other ABBA data the information collected through these censuses is available to anyone who might like to have details of specific regions or sites - ask for details of the sites you are interested in. (Email: *arabian.bird@dial.pipex.com*).

(NB Please see *Phoenix* 21 p. 14 for a note of caution on the international boundaries used on the above map and the map on page 23) .

Notes to *Phoenix* Subscriptions and ABBA sales items (See form on previous page)

1. All items are post free. If airmail is desired please add 25% to total cost.
2. If payment is preferred in a foreign currency please send bank notes (at current rate of exchange). Unfortunately bank charges on foreign currency cheques are now so exorbitant as to make payment by foreign cheque unrealistic for small sums.
3. All subscribers to *Phoenix* will receive a personal reminder when their next subscription is due.
4. Those with UK bank accounts can, if they wish, pay for their *Phoenix* subscription by annual bankers order instead of every five years. Please ask for a bankers order form.
5. Cheques are to be made payable to "M C Jennings" or "ABBA"

Orders and cheques to be sent to: Michael C Jennings, Coordinator Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, England.

How to Prove Swifts are Nesting Nearby

Elsewhere in this issue there is an article on the breeding sites of Forbes-Watson's swift *Apus berliozi* in Dhofar. Many field workers will know how difficult it is to get breeding data in Arabia on swifts. Yet it is especially important for ABBA to know if the local swifts are breeding, visiting or on migration. In view of the complicated status and occurrenee of pallid swifts *A. pallidus* in the UAE as described by Aspinall (2005), it is also important to determine when swifts are breeding. You might hear swifts screeching, probably equivalent to song (BEC 2) and you may see them engaged in courtship chases, even aerial copulation. You can also pick out pairs as they fly around near possible colonies. But unless you can actually see birds entering and leaving breeding sites you end up with low 'probable' breeding codes. Frustrating as these are never as valuable as good solid evidence of breeding.

You can obtain good evidence of breeding by exploiting the need of swifts to make nests from nesting material which they collect in the air. This need is common to all the swifts breeding in Arabia.

If you suspect that swifts are breeding in an area, go to any place where there are a few feeding and find a high spot, such as a cliff, high building or a bridge. When there are swifts about drop feathers or grasses (feathers are best) over the side and before very long swifts will be seen to grab the items as they are taken away in the breeze. It seems that swifts are always on the look out for windblown items. Airborne nesting material is probably less dependable than their food supplies, so they seem to break off feeding to take the opportunity of collecting nest material. Collecting nesting material is BEC 9. OK it is not confirmed breeding but it does provide good proof that they are breeding nearby. Very often it is possible to follow birds back to their nest sites or colonies which you can then check out later to get a code BEC 13/14.

I have used this technique successfully with palm swifts *Cypsiurus parvus* in south west Saudi Arabia and with pallid swifts in Oman. The 'Grand Canyon' on Jebal Shems (XA23) is an ideal site for the technique. In April 2005 a swift took the third feather I launched. They usually take the 'bait' at great speed and never seem to miss. It is very satisfying to watch this elegant demonstration of local breeding. Also at the nearby Saiq Plateau (XB23) in the same month I saw numerous pallid swifts collecting grasses and other material from a very strong whirlwind vortex that went through the area. So this common natural phenomenon is something else to look out for in terms of getting data on swifts breeding.

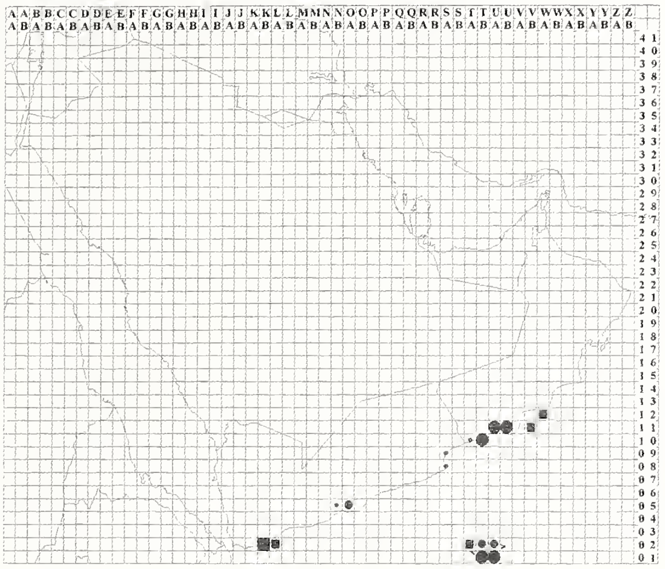
Try it next spring.

Reference: • Aspinall, S. 2005. The mysterious status of Gulf Pallid Swifts. *Phoenix* 21: 5–6.

Forbes-Watson's Swift unravelled

At the OSME AGM in July 2005 Andrew Grieve gave a fascinating talk about the debate concerning the status of Forbes-Watson's swift *Apus berliozi* in Arabia and the true identify of the distinctive 'Dhofar swifts' which, for many years, had confused visitors to southern Oman and Yemen. Until now Forbes-Watson's swifts have only been recorded in Arabia with certainty by the collection of specimens from Socotra, by Forbes-Watson himself, in the early 1960s. However various observers had started to refer to their unidentified swifts, seen on the southern coast of Arabia, as this species.

Part of the problem of obtaining confirmed identification has been misplaced and mis-identified museum material. The bird collection of the Natural History Museum Tring in Hertfordshire UK was thought not to have any examples of *A. berliozi* but it did have several swifts, mostly identified as *A. apus pekinensis*, from southern Arabia collected between Aden and Dhofar. Some of these were collected in the middle of summer or at suspected breeding sites. It turns out some of these specimens are indeed *berliozi*. Piecing together the records available and matching up photos of specimens and live birds examined in the hand, Andrew was able to show that the species is probably quite widespread in southern Arabia. It is understood a detailed paper will appear in *Sandgrouse* in due course.



Likely records of Forbes-Watson's swift *Apus berliozi* on the ABBA database. (Records prior to 1984 are shown as squares and from 1984 onwards as circles).

Forbes-Watson's Swifts nesting in Dhofar

by Steve Tibbett

During April 2005 I had hundreds of Forbes-Watson's swifts *Apus berliozi* coming in across the Salalah Plain (UA11) heading for the Jebal Qara. They appeared to be newly arriving birds as they flew in straight and level flight across the Sun Farm area of the plain and on towards the hills. On the weekend 21-23 April, numbers were seen flying up the face of the jebal and circling above an adjacent hill top. These movements happened early in the day and appeared to stop by about 10.00 hrs. From previous observations I had suspected this species to breed on sea cliffs near Raysut (TB10). A visit to that site on the 23 April did not find any swifts which I thought tended to confirm my belief that the many birds on the plain and the nearby jebal were newly arrived birds, not yet interested in breeding.

In the next couple of weeks there were many birds feeding over any green area around Salalah and Taqah (UA11) and over the jebal nearby. However by later May this activity had ceased and only the odd bird could be seen in the Salalah area, although small numbers came to the water at Taqah most of the day to drink. On 16 June there were around 50 birds at the Raysut cliffs. Whilst most of the cliff area at Raysut seems unsuitable for nesting, being mostly vertical, there is one small area of overhang close to the water and swifts in small groups were seen to fly into this, in the same manner as they do on the cliffs further east in UB11, see below. The breeding activity of these birds at Raysut was never in doubt with many always flying about close to the sea and zooming in and out of the overhangs but although birds make as if to land they usually do not, turning away and flying back out again. Only before 10 am did I see birds enter or leave holes. They were always present in the following weeks and they almost certainly breed there, probably about 30 pairs. However these few birds did not account for the missing thousands. Dave Sargeant suggested they may breed at the Wadi Darbat waterfall area (UA11) but none were there on 7 July, nor on the jebal above, though birds were still coming to the water at Taqah just below. A search some 20 km east of Taqah, in square UB11, found them. Large numbers of Forbes-Watson's swifts were in the area, which has extensive high sea cliffs. At this time I was interested in proving they were really breeding in the cliffs, rather than somewhere on the jebal, but although groups of birds were flying under overhangs none were seen to actually land or not fly back out again. As it was by now past midday I decided it was probably too late for them to be active and I should return at an earlier time on another day.

By 27 July the monsoon weather had started and rough seas had developed. I arrived at the cliffs at 09.00 hrs. By 09.30 hrs I had managed to find a place where I could get well down the cliff and view a breeding area. In the next half hour at least a dozen birds flew straight into holes in the small area I was watching. Only one was seen to fly out. A few other birds flew in and clung to the rock with their heads in a hole for a short while, before dropping off again. After 10 am no more birds were seen to land, though they continued to fly out again. A small number flew past with food balls bulging out their crops, this making the white throat patch very obvious. I think these observations suggest that some incubation was continuing at the time but that birds with food balls were probably feeding nestlings. The nesting site appeared to be very selective, being situated just a few metres above the crashing monsoon waves. Nest were clustered at a paler band of lightly curved overhang, perhaps 4.5 m wide, which was a mass of cracks and holes. The waves, which had undercut the area with a much bigger hollow, tended to be ejected back out, away from the nesting site. Even so incoming birds often had to dodge large plumes of spray. Higher drier areas of the cliff appeared to hold no birds even where there were overhangs. It should be said that the above relates to just one small area of the sea cliff and it could be a different story in other areas, but because of the similarity to the Raysut site I feel all the breeding sites will be much the same.

On 8 September there were no birds in the Salalah - Taqah area at all, not even coming to water. Although the breeding sea cliffs were not visited that day it seemed that breeding activity in Dhofar was over for the year.

Steve Tibbett, Airwork Ltd, P O Box 100, Thumrait, Muscat 222, Oman.

ABBA and *Phoenix* Notes and Notices

Contributions to *Phoenix* *Phoenix* is published annually and contains papers, reports, correspondence and announcements submitted by contributors to the ABBA project and those interested in Arabian birds. Papers are not independently refereed but every effort is made to ensure that content is accurate. However the views expressed by authors are not necessarily shared by the Editor or the sponsors of *Phoenix* or the ABBA project. Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. Notices of reports and publications etc and requests for information are included free of charge. Articles may be emailed, submitted on disk (please state software), typed or handwritten. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

Records still needed The ABBA project is nearing an important stage with the publication of the Atlas. However the database will continue to be added to even after publication and the data made available to anyone who needs information on Arabian birds or the region. Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly uncommon breeding species, are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2005 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc or these can be found at the ABBA website: (*http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/*).

How to obtain *Phoenix* One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment of £25 (€35/US$45) for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 23-27 inclusive, or by an annual standing order for Sterling bank accounts. Because of excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling(£), Euros (€) or US dollar banknotes, or the equivalent in other foreign currency notes. Subscribers will notice that their address label includes a number which indicates the last number of *Phoenix* they have subscribed to. Would subscribers please send in their new subscription before their old sub runs out to avoid the time and expense of reminders. Free copies for those in Arabia and regular correspondents may be discontinued without warning - so to ensure you get a copy of each issue please think about subscribing. *(It is essential that those getting a free copy acknowledge receipt of No 22 and confirm their current address, or future issues will not be sent).* Back issues of *Phoenix* (Nos 1-21) are available at £2/€3/US$4 each (or the whole set for £30/€45/US$55) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. Will subscribers please remember to advise of any future change of address.

The *Phoenix* This newsletter is covered by the *Zoological Record*. Articles and information in *Phoenix* may be freely reproduced for scientific or non-profit purposes, provided appropriate acknowledgement is given to authors, the ABBA project and its sponsors. Views expressed by authors, including the position of international boundaries on maps or reference to same in the text, do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor or the project sponsors. Articles in this issue are by the Editor unless shown otherwise.

ABBA Website The ABBA Website (*http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/*) provides:

- An introduction to the ABBA project.
- Instructions to those wishing to contribute records and the forms to use. It includes a list of Arabian breeding birds with short notes on the status and distribution of each.
- A Bibliography of many hundreds of references to Arabian birds. This can be used as a search tool for species, subjects and places.
- Index to previous *Phoenix* issues.
- *Phoenix* subscriptions and items for sale.
- Digital images from ABBA surveys.

Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds (or potential breeders) received during the last year. Records are from 2005 unless noted otherwise. Not all these records have been verified or accepted by local recorders. (Recent reports from Kuwait are dealt with in separate articles at pages 5 and 11). Notes after the name of the correspondent are editorial content not part of the original report.

Ostrich *Struthio camelus* One dead on road near Kabt (NB35) Kuwait 21 January (George Gregory). Some road kill! This species is now in captivity all over Arabia.

Little grebe ***Tachybaptus ruficollis*** A late nest (C1) being incubated in the Fujairah area (WA27) 18 July 2004 (Simon Aspinall).

Great crested grebe ***Podiceps cristatus*** Pair incubating (C3) at the usual Dhahran site (QA29) on 15 April. Single chick seen 4 May which was a full sized juvenile by 1 July but still attended by adults (Graham Lobley)

Socotra cormorant ***Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*** About 23-25,000 pairs were in position at the Hawar islands (QB28) colony, Bahrain in late October 2005 for the new breeding season. First eggs this year were laid on the night of 9/10 October (Howard King).

Egyptian goose ***Alopochen aegyptiacus*** One 21 June at Durmistan pools (QA29) Bahrain. First for Bahrain (Howard King).

Mallard ***Anas platyrhynchus*** Adult with three 2-3 day old ducklings at Abu Dhabi (UA25) on 23 December 2004 (Simon Aspinall). Ducklings of this feral breeder have now been reported for every month December to July and September from several sites in Arabia.

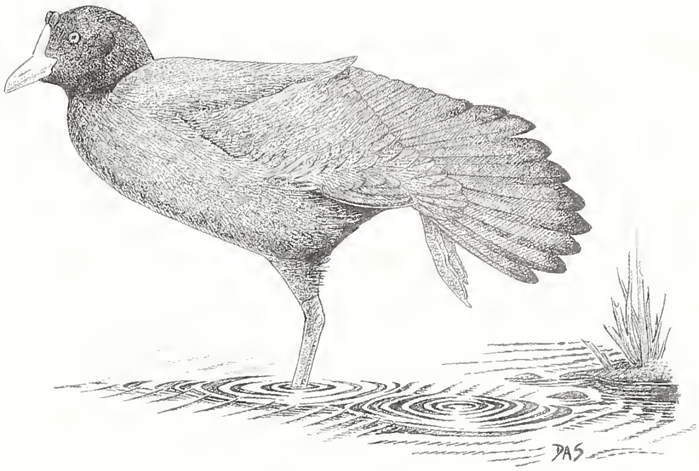
Glossy ibis ***Plegadis falcinellus*** Sixteen at a dairy farm near al Kharg (NB25) on 6 July 2000 (Pers Anders Bertilsson).

Sacred ibis ***Threskionis aethiopicus*** A feral breeding colony at Al Ain Zoo May. There were about 15 pairs nesting outside the enclosure and ten inside with eggs and probably small young (Bernard Pleasance). See picture on page 3.

Verreaux's eagle ***Aquila verreauxii*** One Wadi Meseila (QB07) eastern Yemen 6 June (Martin Päckert and Matthias Sneider).

Moorhen ***Gallinula chloropus*** Adult with two almost fully grown chicks and two tiny chicks at a small dam pool at 2200 m on the Saiq Plateau (XB23), Jebal al Akhdar, 7 July (Jens Eriksen). First confirmed breeding from the Jebal Al Akhdar and the Arabian breeding altitude record.

Purple gallinule ***Porphyrio porphyrio*** At Al Warsen Lake ("Wimpey Pits", VA27) on 25 October two adults were feeding two very young chicks, the second confirmed breeding record for the UAE. There was at least one other bird present (*UAE Twitchers' Guide*).



Crested coot *Fulica cristata* continue to be recorded at Al Warsen lake Dubai but it is still unclear whether young are hybrids or not.

Houbara ***Chlamydotis undulata*** Tracks of adults and juveniles seen in two squares in eastern Yemen March and June 2003 (Christophe Tourenq).

Stone curlew ***Burhinus oedicnemus*** This species has finally been added to the Arabian breeding bird list. There have been various records suggesting probable breeding in the past but on 11 March 1999 two adults were seen with a chick, south west of Riyadh (MA25) on a stony plain. One of the adults gave a broken wing display (Mike Newey). Also a juvenile was seen with an adult at the Al Safi Dairy farm (NB25) near Al Kharg on 6 July 2000 (Per Anders Bertilsson). The young bird in the second observation was judged old enough to fly well but early July is an unlikely time for a migrant in central Arabia, let alone a juvenile.

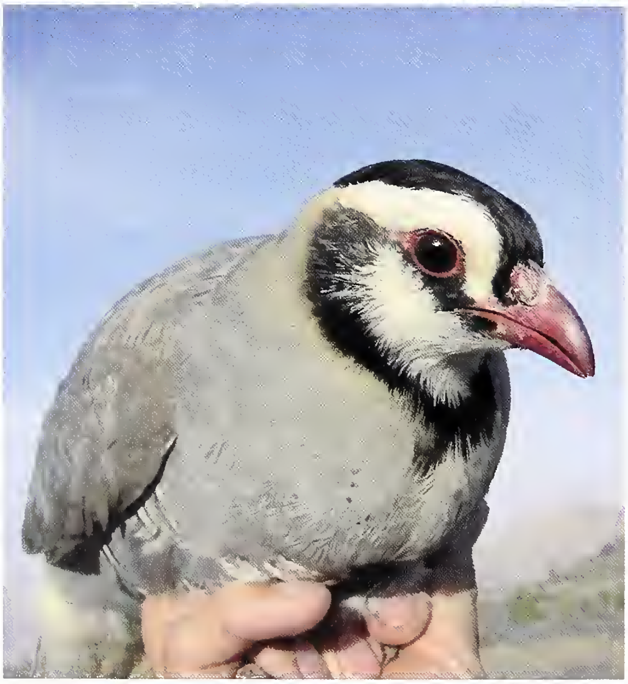
Cream-coloured courser ***Cursorius cursor*** Juveniles on Hadibo plain (UA02), Socotra on 26 February 2004. Best guess for the population on the plain at the time was 25 pairs (Richard Porter). This is probably the densest population anywhere in Arabia.

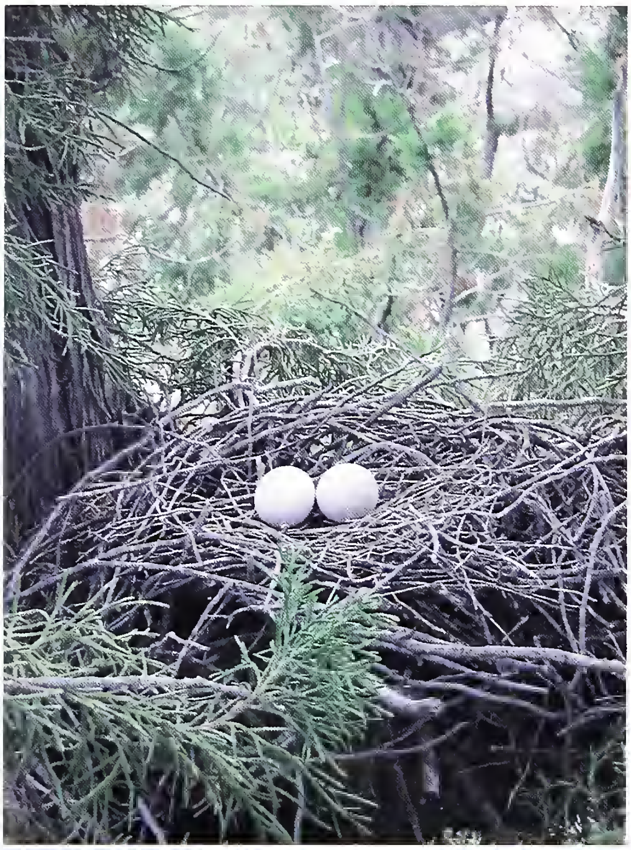
Black-winged stilt ***Himantopus himantopus*** Bred this year at Taqah (UA11) Dhofar in July, an adult seen with three chicks under her wing. The water level at the site this summer was reported as the highest for many years (Steve Tibbett/Ian Brown).

Avocet ***Recurvirostra avosetta*** Eight pairs nested at Al Wathba (UA25) in 2005 but chicks died at about three weeks old possibly from dehydration (Thijs van Overveld).

(*Continued on page 27*)

ABBA Surveys 34 and 35, 2005 (pages 17-20). Clockwise. 1. Rarely visited granite jebals east of Al Hazm, Wadi Al Jawf. 2. Bedouin support team, Wadi Al Jawf. 3. Juniper Plateau (part of the Saiq Plateau), Jebal Al Akhdar. This parkland habitat of *Juniperus, Olea, Buxifolia* and *Dodonaea* is the main habitat of the wood pigeon *Columba palumbus* in Oman. 4. This Arabian red-legged partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* was trapped on Jebal Shems. It is the most widespread of the Arabian endemics, occurring from sea level to at least 3000 m. It was present at both habitats pictured (1 & 3) on this page. 5. The first nest to be photographed of the wood pigeon in Arabia, Saiq Plateau. (All photos Michael Jennings).





Collared pratincole *Glareola pratincole* Two al Safi farm (NB25) near Al Kharg 6 July 2000 (Pers Anders Bertilsson).

Lichtenstein's sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* A female on two eggs and male nearby, Wadi Denegen (UA02) Socotra, 24 February 2004 (Richard Porter).

Jacobin cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* One Wadi Hadramaut (PA09) 3 June (Martin Päckert and Matthias Sneider). First record from the Hadramaut.

Spotted eagle owl *Bubo africanus* An unidentified owl chick received at Al Ain Zoo in May 2003 from the mountains around Dibba (WA28), UAE/Oman border was originally thought to be a desert eagle owl *B. bubo* but when it matured it was clearly an spotted eagle owl. (Thanks to Gary Feulner and Mohammed Resa Khan for the information and photos). The Arabian race of the spotted eagle owl *B. africanus milesi* was first described from a specimen collected near Muscat in the 19th Century. A century elapsed before the next was seen in the area and there have still been very few records from eastern Arabia. This record from Dibba, if the locality is correct, considerably extends the range in northern Oman/UAE.

Ring-necked parakeet *Psittacula krameri* Nesting in ghaf tree holes near Dubai (VA27) and Ras al Khaimah (VB28), eggs, May (Peter Castell and Bernard Pleasance). Reported from Najran (KA11) 17 February (Yosef Alzaby), a new locality for this species.

Plain nightjar *Caprimulgus inornatus* A nightjar churring in Wadi Meseila (QB08) Hadramaut, 5 June was probably this species (Martin Päckert and Matthias Sneider).

Malachite kingfisher *Alcedo cristatus* One Wadi Meseila (QB08) 6 June (Martin Päckert and Matthias Sneider).

White-breasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* One or two present all year at Riyadh watercourse (MB26) June 2000 (Per Anders Bertilsson).

Temminck's horned lark *Eromophila bilopha* Adults and juveniles at Buwayb escarpment (MB27) 21 May 2000 (Per Anders Bertilsson). First breeding record in central Arabia for nearly 25 years.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Fifty with juveniles at Riyadh watercourse 22 June 2000 (Per Anders Bertilsson). Very early (for returning migrants) but nothing to indicate local breeding. There has still not been an incontrovertible confirmed breeding record from Arabia for this species.

Black bushchat *Cercotrichas podobe* One in tamarisk scrub at an effluent lake near Dhahran (QA29) 31 March (Graham Lobley).

Isabelline wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* Four at 2200 m on Saiq Plateau(XB23) Jebal al Akhdar on 7 July. One very scruffy bird was either an extremely worn adult or fledgling still growing (Jens & Hanne Eriksen). This species has not yet been proven to breed in Arabia, perhaps the site could be investigated more thoroughly next summer?

Savi's warbler *Locustella luscinioides* Singing at two sites on Riyadh Watercourse (MB25) March 1999 (Per Anders Bertilsson).

Arabian serin *Serinus rothschildi* Pair at a nest, female incubating, in the crown of a small tree Hammam Garaf (KA07) near Sana'a 23 January (David Stanton).

White-collared Kingfisher breeding at Khor Kalba

By Bernard Pleasance *et al*

During a trip to UAE in the first two weeks of May 2005 we made regular visits to the mangrove lined creeks of Khor Kalba (WA26-27) on the east coast, with the intention of finding, describing and photographing the chicks of booted/Sykes warbler *Hippolais caligata/rama*. We were not successful in that task but we did locate four occupied nests of white-collared kingfisher *Halcyon chloris* in the same mangrove as the warblers.

The first kingfisher nest was in a hole in a large mangrove *Avicennia marina* on the "town" side of the creek and contained three eggs on 7 May (Nest 1). The hole was 1.3 m above ground and about 1 m above high tide, and was almost horizontal with an unlined chamber at the end holding the white eggs. An adult was feeding its mate on the nest with small crabs which were abundant at low tide. The sex of the bird carrying the food was not determined as both birds are said to incubate but it was probably the male. Birds were calling all along the mangroves when we returned on 11 May. They appeared to be confined to the linear strips of older trees near the creek edges. These trees were the only ones large enough and old enough to have the holes that the kingfishers use for nesting and were right next to the open expanses of crab-rich mud exposed at low tide. Nest 2 was also discovered on the town side of the creek, 125 m from Nest 1 and in a similar situation and at the same height. On 11 May it also contained three eggs. Nest 3 was also found that day but on the seaward side of the creek, in another big mangrove, this time 3 m up (2.7 m above high tide) and again with three eggs. It was around 200 m from Nests 1 and 2. Our last nest, Nest 4, was found on 14 May in the same line of trees as the first two nests and 50 m from the nearest of these. The nest was again at about 1.3 m above ground but the contents were not visible because the nest hole sloped away from our line of sight. An adult was seen to carry food into the hole. We were keen to observe and describe a chick of this species and fortunately Nest 2 contained newly hatched young on 15 May. Only one chick was examined but it is likely that there were others in the nest, having probably hatched the day before. A half of an eggshell was visible in the nest. Assuming an incubation period of 21 days then the first egg would have been laid around 20 April. The chick was naked and blind with pink skin on head and back, paler pink below and with pale pink bill, mouth and unmarked tongue, claws were whitish grey. The remaining two nests in which the contents could be examined (Nests 1 and 3) each still held three eggs on 16 May, our last visit. The three nests into which we could see therefore all had three eggs as their full clutch.

The holes of the first three nests were almost horizontal with a slight descent to the floor of the nest chamber at the end. These nests all went into the tree to a distance of 400-500 mm. It is clear from these observations that it is essential for this species to have access to large trees to nest in. These need to be old enough to have developed large holes suitable for nests. It is crucial therefore that the mangrove stands at Khor Kalba, unique in the UAE, are protected effectively and indefinitely to ensure that the distinctive race *H. c. kalbaensis* does not become extinct.

How many white collared kingfisher are there at Khor Kalba? The birds are limited to quite narrow strips of the largest mangrove trees each side of the various creeks that make up Khor Kalba. We made no attempt to walk the whole length of the mangroves so we have no information regarding how much of it is suitable for breeding kingfishers. Based on the spacing of our four nests, albeit a small sample, nests would appear to be around 125 m apart in suitable habitat, that is 16 pairs in each linear kilometre, or both sides of a half a kilometre creek. Perhaps another observer could apply this information to a full habitat survey to arrive at a reasonable estimate for this very important population.

Bernard Pleasance[1], Peter Castell, John Mason and Steve Williams, [1]Windhover, Wattisfield Road, Thelnetham, Diss IP22 1NN, England.

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Address: Reports of breeding birds in Arabia and all correspondence concerning the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* project and the project newsletter, *The Phoenix,* should be sent to: Michael C Jennings, ABBA Co-ordinator, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, UK. Telephone and Fax, 01487 841733/International 00 44 1487 841733. (Email: *arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com).*

Stop Press!! Please note that whilst Phoenix 22 was being prepared for printing the ABBA project got a new broadband email address which is *arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com*. The old address, *arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com*, will remain in use for a few months but will eventually be phased out. The ABBA website *http//dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds* will also change in due eourse. Michael Jennings

In decline? Long-legged buzzard *Buteo rufinus* over the Tuwaiq Escarpment.

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